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a **NEW** short story by

STANLEY ELLIN

Perhaps you noticed that during 1974 we did not publish a new story by Stanley Ellin. For the first time since 1948—for the first time in 26 years—Stanley Ellin was unable to write one of his masterly stories especially for EQMM. Personal affairs and pressure of work schedules prevented Mr. Ellin from making his annual contribution to our pages, but now that he has cleared all such hurdles, we hope that no year in the foreseeable future will fail to bring you one of Stanley Ellin's highspots of contemporary mystery and murder . . .

Can Mr. Hotchkiss, 67 and retired, live in the very heart of a crime jungle and still feel he is living in a neat little corner of paradise? A story of life—and death—in the big city . . .

A CORNER OF PARADISE

by **STANLEY ELLIN**

66 **B**ut it's a jungle," well-intentioned suburban acquaintances would tell him with horror. "You know it's a jungle."

Meaning that it was idiotic of Mr. Hotchkiss—retired on a comfortable pension, two years into his Social Security, and with a few dollars in the bank—it was absolutely idiotic of him to continue living in the heart of the jungle that was New York City. Crime in the streets, in the subways, the parks, disorder, virtual anarchy. New York City.

And here was this small, bespectacled, elderly citizen, almost shoutingly vulnerable to assault by any thug who hungered for a ready-made victim, here he was voluntarily occupying an apartment in the upper East Side of Manhattan. Definitely the heart of the jungle.

Mr. Hotchkiss would take it with a shrug. Futile, he knew, to explain that he was a born and bred New Yorker who found him-

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self at the mere thought of life in the suburbs aching with boredom. And it would be even more futile to try convincing these fearful outlanders that the apartment he had occupied for the past 20 years and the street it was situated on provided him with a small neat corner of paradise.

The street was a solid rank of brownstones and graystones shaded by trees which seemed to thrive on polluted air. If anything at all marred its comfortable, old-fashioned look, it was the gigantic towers of two newly built highrises, one at each end of the block. On the other hand, as Mr. Hotchkiss had appraised it, luxury highrises also meant the kind of tenantry able to meet the fantastically steep rents in those shiny glass cracker boxes. Not bad at all having people like that settle down on the borders of your peaceable little kingdom.

Mr. Hotchkiss was not insensitive to the plight of the downtrodden, but he was one to look facts in the face. As far as he was concerned, those towers might be stuffed from top to bottom with embezzlers, corrupt politicians, and dishonest corporation officers, but such were not likely to go out on the streets for exercise at purse-snatching, mugging, and assault. So, simply as a matter of self-preservation in the jungle, it was better to live among the prosperous than the poor.

And that was the best part of it, because one did not have to be overly prosperous to occupy Mr. Hotchkiss' own apartment in that brownstone midway along the block. The building was rent-controlled by city law, and the apartment, though not all that cheap, was just within Mr. Hotchkiss' carefully budgeted means. By any standards, especially the prevailing inflationary ones, it was the wildest of bargains. Three large, high-ceilinged rooms—bedroom, living room, and kitchen—more than ample closet space, and in a midtown building provided with excellent service by a dour, hard-working Teutonic couple named Braun who occupied the first floor rear. Not only was Mr. Braun an artist at unsticking windows, splicing wires, and sealing leaky plumbing, but for a comparatively small gratuity he would descend to his basement workshop and knock up sturdy wooden shelving or put together elaborate lighting arrangements which would have drawn admiration from any master electrician.

Shelving and lighting arrangements. The shelving, three broad tiers of it, extended halfway along the walls on either side of the huge bay windows which overlooked the street. The lighting ar-

rangements were fluorescent tubes skillfully fixed over and behind the shelves to provide on sunless days a rather macabre, but effective, artificial sunlight for the treasures on those shelves. The coleus.

There were, by exact count, 72 of these treasures filling the table in the bay windows and lining the shelves. Six dozen small potted plants whose leaves were each an enchanting pattern of green and red in all their various shades, and of black and white providing balance with the greens and reds. And, Mr. Hotchkiss had discovered with amazement and delight, no two leaves ever reproduced the precisely same pattern. One had to look closely to realize that here was infinite variety, no end to it.

Coleus, Mr. Hotchkiss would whisper now and then, the word delectable in his mouth. Coleus. Certainly not painted nettle, the flat and ugly name tacked onto them in parentheses in all those gardening books.

Coleus.

He had been introduced to coleus by chance not long after his retirement when he had been asked by the Ostroffs, the ancient, long-retired pharmacist and his wife who inhabited the rear apartment on his floor, to do some plant-sitting for them while they were away visiting children and grandchildren. Having learned from Mr. Braun, they had said hopefully, that Mr. Hotchkiss was now retired himself and possibly with time on his hands, would he kindly keep an eye on these few potted plants for a week or two? The sad fact was that Mr. and Mrs. Braun who ordinarily took this responsibility had no talent for it. The plants, more often than not, suffered from their ministrations.

Well, Mr. Hotchkiss had not been all that enthusiastic about saying yes. For one thing, he felt no great warmth for potted plants, especially this odd variety which appeared to be just a bunch of leaves and no flowers. For another thing, he suspected that if, when the Ostroffs returned home, there were anything wrong with even one of those multicolored leaves, he would be held responsible.

However, there was really no way out of it, so there he had been each day, watering and feeding according to instructions, and, most unpleasant duty of all, carefully examining each plant for the insidious mealybug.

This, according to Mrs. Ostroff, loathing in her voice as she described it, was kind of a very tiny fuzzy white thing which de-

stroyed any plant it could get its teeth into. And if, God forbid, found, it must be instantly exterminated by a solution of alcohol delicately applied with a swab. Otherwise—!

Grimly determined that there be no otherwise, Mr. Hotchkiss each day did insect inspection, using a reading glass for the purpose. And it was with this particular duty that he found himself first mildly interested, then fascinated, then enamored of the plants. Really obsessed by those delicately formed leaves, their varieties of color, their infinite variations of pattern, and, as he finally admitted to himself, the fact that these small ornamental objects were actually living things wholly dependent on his good will and attentions.

By the time the Ostroffs returned and relieved him of his duties, he had already started his own window garden of coleus. Then, as new varieties caught his eye in florist shops, he expanded the garden and kept expanding it until finally Mr. Braun had to be called in for the construction of shelving and lighting, the better to cosset the collection and keep order among it. There was indeed mealybug along the way, obscene little gray-white ovals which, when Mr. Hotchkiss studied them with revulsion through the reading glass, seemed to stare back at him menacingly.

One or two precious plants were lost to them, but the alcohol solution did the trick for the rest. After that, along with their watering and feeding, there was also a rigorous daily mealybug inspection of each plant, and so mornings, from after breakfast to lunch, were pretty well taken up with this gardening.

The results, as the Ostroffs themselves enviously admitted, were worth it. The coleus thrived in all their glory, a southern exposure and added fluorescence making them considerably more impressive than the Ostroffs' rather meager specimens, the intense devotion they got certainly contributing to their magnificence. Mr. and Mrs. Ostroff could never, as they guiltily admitted, talk to their plants, although this was so highly recommended by some devotees.

"I'd feel like a fool," said Mrs. Ostroff. "They don't have ears, do they? If something's got ears, then I'll talk to it."

Mr. Hotchkiss talked to his plants. At first he did it uneasily, whispering his praise of them, his encouragement of them almost inaudibly, glancing over his shoulder as he did so, as if some cynic might be standing there behind him sneering at this eccen-

tricity. Then he became bolder. He crooned lovingly to the coleus, singled out some of the more dazzling plants for special attention, made sure the others would not be miffed by this favoritism by addressing kind remarks to them, and would bid them all an equally affectionate good night when the time came in the early evening to draw the shades of the bay windows and douse the fluorescent lighting.

Did they appreciate this? If the glowing velvety perfection of each leaf was the evidence, they appreciated it with all their flowery hearts.

Yes, Mr. Hotchkiss would gratefully reflect as he entered the living room each new morning, this lovingly tended, orderly profusion of beauty was all that had been needed to make even more paradisaical this neat little corner of paradise.

Not that the coleus made up his entire life. After all, here at his doorstep was glamorous Manhattan itself in its infinite, and often admission-free, variety. And at the Golden Age Club there were kinspirits, gentlemen and ladies both, eager to share visits to the park, concerts, museums, and, sometimes, movies, although movies calculated to entertain rather than shock were getting harder and harder to find. Safe in the streets as they wended their way around town? As Mr. Hotchkiss put it, "There's safety in numbers," and so they always moved safely in a group. The wolves prowling the city were out for stragglers. With Mr. Hotchkiss in charge of the outings, there never were any Golden Age stragglers.

Best of all were those afternoons when he entertained a select gathering in his own apartment, serving coffee and cake and getting as a reward the company's unstinted admiration of his coleus. He had, as one and all agreed, the greenest of all green thumbs.

So there it was. The coleus, the apartment, the city, the comparative good health except for a tendency to nervous stomach and occasional insomnia, neither of which, as he cheerfully recognized, was fatal. A good, contented retirement. Everything he had dreamed of during those long years grinding away at his book-keeping.

The trouble started—though who could predict it at the time—when Mr. Ostroff died, and a few weeks later Mrs. Ostroff, forlorn in her widowhood, was induced to give up the apartment and move in with a daughter and son-in-law who had a room to

spare in their fine Long Island home. The day before the removal, Mrs. Ostroff called Mr. Hotchkiss in and weepily presented him with some gifts of remembrance which he would just as soon have done without but could ill refuse. Her few coleus, all of them now in such wretched condition from neglect that they were plainly beyond salvation, and in remembrance of her late husband and his pharmaceutical career, the heavy brass mortar and pestle which had once ornamented the window of his store and which had then become a centerpiece on the mantel over the Ostroff fireplace.

Mr. Hotchkiss took the gifts, and when the donor was safely gone he disposed of the plants in his garbage can and, after lugging the mortar and pestle through the apartment searching for a place to store it until he could decently dispose of it, he decided to follow its donor's example and so set it on the mantelpiece over his fireplace. He felt it struck rather an odd note there, but when one of the ladies from the Golden Age Club who knew about such esoterica commented admiringly on it, he left it there, and in a very short while it seemed as familiar and properly in place as the multitude of coleus did on their tables and shelves.

Meanwhile, as could be seen through its frequently open door, the Ostroff apartment was undergoing a complete painting and polishing until one day a truckload of furniture was carted up the stairs to it. Mr. Hotchkiss who until now had not greatly concerned himself about the nature of his new neighbors took note that the furniture appeared to be brand-new, extremely ornate and expensive, and not in very good taste.

On his way out he stopped on the ground floor where Mr. Braun was supervising the carting in of the furniture. Mr. Braun's ordinarily sour expression now seemed almost amiable as he steered moving men and their loads through the foyer. On the other hand, Mrs. Braun looked even grimmer than usual.

"I see the new tenants are here," Mr. Hotchkiss remarked.

Mrs. Braun sniffed. "Not them. Just one."

"One?"

"By herself. An actress. She says."

"If she says, then it's so, mama," Mr. Braun said reprovingly. "You don't call people a liar for no reason."

"Ho," Mrs. Braun said. She turned to Mr. Hotchkiss. "You know what is her name, she says? Choo Choo. That is a name? Choo Choo?"

"If the owner says she will be a good tenant," said Mr. Braun majestically, "she will be a good tenant. Enough now."

"What the owner says," Mrs. Braun declared, "is only because now the apartment is no more rent controlled, he gets plenty more for it."

According to city law, Mr. Hotchkiss knew, when leasehold was given up on a rent-controlled apartment, the apartment did become subject to a stiff increase in rental. The thought made him that much more aware of his own pleasantly rent-controlled condition.

He stopped at the mailboxes in the outer foyer before going out to the street. Sure enough, there was a new nameplate in the box of 2B—second floor rear—and it read C. C. Guilfoyle. C. C. for Choo Choo? Choo Choo Guilfoyle. Had the senior Guilfoyles really attached this curious name to their offspring? Unlikely, Mr. Hotchkiss decided.

He went out to the street. There, giving sharp instructions to the moving men in their coming and going, was a young woman who must be C. C. Guilfoyle. A tall, slender, red-haired young woman, extremely long-legged and full-breasted, the tightness of sweater and shortness of skirt accentuating what Mr. Hotchkiss had to admit was a really remarkable figure. A pretty girl too. Strikingly pretty. Well, well, Mr. Hotchkiss thought, it wouldn't hurt the old building to have someone like this brightening it up. Indeed, from the reactions of male passersby, it was plain that he was not alone in appreciating the picture she made.

He walked over to her. "Miss Guilfoyle?"

She warily took his measure. "Uh huh."

"Well, in that case," said Mr. Hotchkiss brightly, "I am your hallway neighbor. Upstairs. I just wanted to wish you welcome to your new home."

"Yeah," Miss Guilfoyle said chillingly. "Well, thanks." Evidently, she was not keen on neighborliness. She turned away and addressed herself to the moving men again, and Mr. Hotchkiss left it at that. After all, the Ostroffs had occupied the second floor rear for ten years before they and Mr. Hotchkiss had even visited each other's apartments. It was the New York style, the only way really to assure one's privacy in an overcrowded city.

So Miss Guilfoyle settled in, and, like the other tenants of the building, became largely invisible. And life in the building again moved on its placid course.

Until at a few minutes after four one morning—the darkest of the dark hours—when Mr. Hotchkiss' sleep was blasted apart by a roaring and snarling which suggested nothing so much as a cageful of angry lions loosed into the bedroom and sounding off in furious temper. Two seconds later Mr. Hotchkiss, sitting up in bed, his heart racing, realized that the lions were not there surrounding the bed but were outside in the street. Were not lions at all, but a car motor being raced as if the driver were warming it up for a record-breaking run down the Indianapolis Speedway.

Actually, the uproar below was not all that unusual. Early every weekday morning, at about the time Mr. Hotchkiss was breakfasting, there would be an intermittent racket up and down the block as cars, locked bumper to bumper against the curb where they had been parked overnight, would strain to pull free of each other and be on the move. But during daylight hours one accepted such noises as part of life in the big city.

Between midnight and dawn, however, noisy as the block might be during the day it now fell into a blessed silence. The occasional wail of a siren on an emergency vehicle rushing by, yes. The occasional loud voice of unsober revelers making their way to one of the buildings on the block, yes. But one was so accustomed to such as this that it never broke through the shell of a deep refreshing sleep.

But this roaring and snarling below was distinctly an aberration. Ear-shattering and nerve-shattering, it went on and on until Mr. Hotchkiss crawled out of bed and made his way to the window. Sure enough the car was directly below. A monstrous object, one of those oversized, overpowered sports cars with such an exaggerated sweep and curve of chassis that it resembled a gleaming, low-slung snowplow. One of those noxious contrivances so streamlined that even when at rest it appeared to be lunging full speed ahead.

It was jockeying back and forth between the two vehicles which hemmed it in fore and aft, sometimes stopping between its small frustrated motions to crouch there and snarl savagely in resentment of its plight.

Back and forth it went, back and forth, until at last it maneuvered free, and with a long triumphant blast on its horn by the driver it was gone.

And, as far as Mr. Hotchkiss was concerned, so was the rest of his night's sleep. No use even getting into bed again with this

blazing sense of outrage in him. Good Lord, even granting that a car like that was constructed to be extraordinarily noisy, who, for heaven's sake, would want to own any such loud, wasteful toy unless he had no regard for his neighbors to start with? And that final blast of the horn was the most brutal stroke. The ultimate outrage.

Oh, well, Mr. Hotchkiss told himself before he finally fell asleep long after dawn, no use dwelling on it forever. It was over and done with.

It was not.

It happened the next morning a few minutes before five o'clock.

It happened the morning after that at half-past three.

It did not happen the following morning, although it might as well have since Mr. Hotchkiss came bolt awake at three o'clock, anticipating it.

Then, a day later, just as Mr. Hotchkiss had taken desperate hope that perhaps this blight was permanently removed from his life, it happened once more.

He phoned the police and got sympathy. He got sympathy from his circle at the Golden Age Club, that and a recounting of similar blights afflicting them. He spoke to the tenant in the first floor front, elderly Mrs. Gordon, and even as he put the question to her of how she bore this violent interruption to her slumbers before dawn almost every morning, he realized from her politely smiling expression of inquiry, her hand cupped to her ear, that of course it would take nothing less than an earthquake to interrupt her slumbers; she was deaf as a post.

He spoke to the Clearys on the top floor, third floor front, and discovered that they were happily addicted to sleeping pills which their kindly doctor had long ago prescribed. If he wanted the name of the doctor—?

As the blight continued through the second week and the third—loud mornings followed unpredictably by an occasional silent morning—Mr. Hotchkiss found that his every waking moment was filled with black and vengeful thoughts of that unholy machine. There was a vampirish aspect to it, too, since the car was never in evidence during daylight hours.

Finally, much as he detested putting himself in the same category as those old ladies on the block who spent their time seated at their windows behind flimsy curtains, keeping an eye on their neighbors, Mr. Hotchkiss planted himself at the open window of

his bedroom after dinner one evening and kept tedious watch until the car made its appearance a little before midnight. There was no space for it directly in front of the house that night, but there was one a short distance away. He watched it enter the space and could foresee exactly what would happen when it strove to leave it in a few hours.

Then the driver pulled himself out of the car—a large bulky man, he needed an effort to do it—and moved down the street toward the house itself. Mr. Hotchkiss heard the door below him open and close. He went quickly to his foyer door, opened it an inch, and peered out. The bulky figure tiptoed heavily up the stairway into his vision, a complete stranger, no one at all who belonged to the building, and stopped before Miss Guilfoyle's door. He thrust a key into the door, swung it open, and disappeared within.

Miss Guilfoyle's apartment.

So that was it.

Choo Choo Guilfoyle. An actress, indeed.

How shrewd Mrs. Braun had been in her sour estimate of this new tenant.

But that was really not the issue. Mr. Hotchkiss was no prude. Since it was always the same car, Miss Guilfoyle could hardly be charged with operating on a public basis. Indeed, if her—whatever you wanted to call him—her admirer would only exit the scene quietly after each visit, one could ask little more of the young lady as a neighbor. But to have her attended on by someone who kept blasting off before dawn like an astronaut headed for the moon—well, it made life absolutely intolerable.

And, face it, not only intolerable for him but for the coleus. Sensitive life forms that they were, responsive to every emotional current around them, they were no longer thriving. It took an eye like Mr. Hotchkiss' to detect it, but to that eye it was plain that the glow was fading, the vigor departing from those leaves. What use to put on a falsely smiling face while watering and tending these plants, what use to heap encouragement and endearments on them, when, right down to their newest, barely formed leaves they saw through the mask? As long as their beloved caretaker knew only vengeful and bitter thoughts, all the sunshine and fluorescent lighting in the world would not suffice to brighten their days.

No, they would not long survive under these conditions.

The time had come for action.

But what action?

To knock on that door this moment, have it out politely but firmly with the gentleman caller, that was the ticket.

No, not this moment. It would be, Mr. Hotchkiss suspected, the most awkward possible time for any such confrontation. But within a very few hours, the caller would be departing. He would be, to put it delicately, fulfilled. In a pleasant mood. Receptive to well-justified complaint.

Leaving the foyer door open the merest bit, Mr. Hotchkiss settled himself behind it in a straightbacked chair—no chance of dozing off that way—and waited. It was a long aching wait, but a little before four o'clock he heard the sound of the door in the rear opening and stepped out into the hallway just as the gentleman caller emerged from Miss Guilfoyle's apartment.

Miss Guilfoyle, standing in her doorway in negligee, made an extremely attractive appearance. The man, Mr. Hotchkiss took note, certainly did not. He was very large and bulky indeed, with a moonlike face somewhat too large for its snub nose, pursy lips, and piggish eyes. The only thing on that unpleasant face in proportion to it was a sweeping mustache. The mustache was gray, as was the elaborate hairdo. This was no young buck, Mr. Hotchkiss saw at a glance, not at all the sort of man one would attribute that car to, but someone who was distinctly on the downhill side of middle age.

Gray. And so was the outfit he wore, matching jacket and trousers in pale gray suede. Modish it may have been on some young cavalier, but it made this boorish hulk resemble nothing so much as a gigantic mealybug. Exactly that. A veritable two-legged mountain of a mealybug.

The man stared at Mr. Hotchkiss in robe and slippers approached him. "Sir," said Mr. Hotchkiss, his voice discreetly lowered in view of the time and the place, "there is something I would like to settle with you. When you—"

"What?" the man said in a loud whisper. "Who the hell are you?"

"I happen to live in that apartment there which overlooks the street. And every time you visit here—"

"Every time I visit here?" The piggish eyes glared. "What's that to you, mister?"

There seemed to be no way of delivering an uninterrupted sen-

tence to this fellow. "Sir," Mr. Hotchkiss said patiently, "please understand that I am not meddling in your affairs." Too late it struck him that this might not be the most politic way to put it. "All I ask of you—"

This time the interruption came from a different direction. "Oh, for God's sake, knock it off," Miss Guilfoyle told the mealybug. "It's getting late."

The man wheeled on her. "Is it? You know, baby, I'm getting the idea you do a lot of talking to the neighbors, don't you?"

"Me?" Miss Guilfoyle motioned at Mr. Hotchkiss. "To this little creep?" Then her lip curled scornfully. "You've got that in your mind a lot, don't you?" she said to the man. "My even saying one little word to anybody in the whole world."

"That I do," the man said. "So keep it in mind, big mouth." He put a hand against her overwhelming chest and thrust her back through the doorway. He turned to Mr. Hotchkiss. "As for you—" he said.

Mr. Hotchkiss firmly held his ground. "Sir, if you will hear me out—"

"As for you," the man said, "you just keep that pointy nose out of other people's business. My business especially." He accompanied this with a violent shove against Mr. Hotchkiss' distinctly unimpressive chest which sent Mr. Hotchkiss staggering backward. "Look here—" Mr. Hotchkiss said in protest, but another shove sent him right through his own doorway, and then his door was pulled shut against him.

Mr. Hotchkiss stood there in his foyer shaking with impotent outrage. Literally shaking, he realized. He couldn't even get his feet to move him off this spot.

The Urge to Kill.

His widowed mother, with whom he had lived and to whom he had devoted himself until her death—yes, his mother, that gentle soul, on rare occasions when she had been pushed to the point of ultimate exasperation by someone, would use that phrase, capitals and all. *"I tell you, son, after what she did, I felt the Urge to Kill."*

He felt it now in every wildly vibrating nerve. If he had gun in hand this moment, he would gladly use it against that monstrous mealybug and his female and never mind the consequences. Fire every bullet into both of them until they fell down and lay writhing in their final agony. A prolonged agony.

Mr. Hotchkiss stood there, his fist around the imaginary gun,

and even from where he stood he suddenly heard the car snarl into action. Snarl and roar on and on endlessly until, at last, there was that familiar blast of the horn, a sound of departure, and silence.

That did it.

With an effort Mr. Hotchkiss made his way into the living room. Wrong of him, he knew, to even enter the presence of the coleus with such waves of fury emanating from him, bewildering and terrifying them, shattering their nerves. Looking around at the row on row of plants, he had the feeling that, indiscernible as the motion might be, they were actually shrinking away from him. He, the caretaker, the fount of security and tenderness for them, was now providing what? Only catastrophe.

Simple choice. Either he and the coleus would be driven forever from their rent-controlled Eden, or he must strike an overwhelming blow in its defense.

But how could any effective blow be struck against a mustached and ruthless bravo who was twice one's size and strength?

A bullet from the bedroom window? A bomb tossed into that automobile? Ridiculous. Sheer fantasy.

The mortar and pestle on the mantelpiece caught Mr. Hotchkiss' eye. He lifted out the pestle. Eight inches of solid metal, capped with a small knob at one end, a large one at the other. And heavy. Mr. Hotchkiss hefted it, considered it, his thoughts racing frantically, until little by little they took on craftily logical form.

Yes. Oh, yes.

He slipped the pestle into the pocket of his robe, keeping a concealing hand over its smaller knob. He went out into the hallway and pressed the bell on Miss Guilfoyle's door. Her expression, when she appeared, all raised eyebrows and knowing smile, suggested that she was prepared to welcome the apologetic return of her angry cavalier. Her face hardened at the sight of her caller. "Oh, it's you, is it?"

"Yes," said Mr. Hotchkiss. "Miss Guilfoyle, I'm aware that I've made some difficulties for you. I must speak to you about that right now."

"All you have to do, mister—"

"Right now," Mr. Hotchkiss said firmly. He aimed a commanding finger at the interior of her apartment. "Inside, please. In private."

"Look, mister—"

"Oh, I realize that you are, so to speak, under orders, Miss Guilfoyle," said Mr. Hotchkiss, "but even so—"

"Me?" said Miss Guilfoyle incredulously. "Under orders?"

"Well, I did have the impression—"

Miss Guilfoyle motioned him into her living room. "Now let's get something straight," she said.

Mr. Hotchkiss aimed the finger again, this time at the couch occupying the center of the room. "Please sit down. All I ask is that you bear with me for one minute. After that—"

"One minute?"

"Less."

Miss Guilfoyle seated herself firmly, her face stony. She raised her arm and fixed her eyes on a jeweled wrist watch. "Exactly one minute," she said, "and then it's my turn."

"Of course," said Mr. Hotchkiss as he withdrew the pestle from his pocket and brought it down on her skull as hard as he could. Her arm dropped into her lap, but she remained in the same sitting position. He struck again and again until she fell forward on the floor. He gingerly sounded her pulse to make sure there was no beat at all, and then returned to his apartment, leaving her door wide open.

There had been no blood spilled, as far as he saw, but when he examined the pestle closely he saw that, yes, there were telltale stains on it. He washed them off carefully under the kitchen faucet, then brought to the table the mortar and three of the most leafy coleus. He transplanted them, good moist earth and all, into the mortar, arranging the pestle as a centerpiece sunk deep into the earth, only its small end showing a bit above the surface and the coleus leaves luxuriantly surrounding it.

He placed the mortar back on the mantelpiece and put a few plants from the shelves on either side of it. A little readjustment of the pots on the shelves closed the gaps among them, and all that remained to do was wash out and store away the pots from which the transplanted coleus had been removed.

Done.

He was wakened from the most satisfying sleep he had known for weeks by a ringing of the doorbell along with a lusty banging on the door. Ten o'clock. When he opened the door two men were standing there, and there was a uniformed policeman standing at rest in front of Miss Guilfoyle's door. One of the men held out a wallet toward him to display the badge pinned to it.

"Police," the man informed Mr. Hotchkiss succinctly. "Lieutenant Noble." He motioned at his companion. "Detective Gomez. I take it you're Mr. Hotchkiss?"

"Yes."

"We'd like to ask you some questions. Mind if we come in?"

"Not at all." As Mr. Hotchkiss led them into the living room, he saw that he had not yet drawn up the shades of the bay windows, thus depriving the couple of several precious hours of daylight. He drew them up, and Lieutenant Noble surveyed the array of plant life with interest. "Well now, looks like the Botanic Garden, don't it?"

"Yes," said Mr. Hotchkiss. "But questions, you said. Questions about what? Is something wrong?"

"You might call it that. Lady across the hall there. Guilfoyle. You know her?"

"We exchanged a few words once or twice. She only moved in recently."

"So the super tells me. Well, she was killed last night. Beat to death."

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Hotchkiss.

"Yeah. People upstairs saw her door wide open on their way down to work, and there she was. Now I'd like you to take a look at this"—the lieutenant held out a large photograph toward Mr. Hotchkiss—"and tell me if you know this guy. Ever seen him around?"

There was no mistaking that face decorated by that grotesque mustache. "But that was the man—" Mr. Hotchkiss said.

"Yeah?"

"Well, he was right out there in the hall last night. Actually, this morning. About four o'clock."

"And you saw him? How did that happen?"

"I don't sleep well sometimes—I suffer from insomnia—and last night was one of my bad nights. I was up and doing when I heard a noise in the hallway. That's very unusual here at that hour."

"And then?"

"Then I opened my door and saw this man facing Miss Guilfoyle at her open door."

"In a bad mood maybe? Angry? Threatening?"

"Well, that didn't become evident until I approached them. When he saw me he became enraged. He said something to Miss Guilfoyle about talking too freely to people. Then he pushed her

right through the doorway. Hard."

"And?"

"When I tried to intercede he did the same to me. He was really very powerful. He pushed me right down the hall through my door and slammed it on me. But since Miss Guilfoyle hadn't asked for my help—"

"She didn't seem scared?"

"No, angry rather. So I let it go at that. If I had known—"

"Well," said Lieutenant Noble, "you did what you could. More than most, matter of fact. Anyhow, we already nailed the guy. Wasn't hard. She had only a couple of addresses in her book and this picture on her dresser. But so far he's denying everything. He'd be a tough nut to crack too. Big businessman, high society wife, that kind of stuff. Now it looks like you wrapped him up for us. You understand you'll have to testify about all this, don't you? And it happened exactly the way you said?"

"Exactly," Mr. Hotchkiss said.

"Good. I have to run along now, but Gomez here'll stand by. You get yourself dressed, have your coffee, whatever, and then he'll drive you down to the D.A." Lieutenant Noble turned his attention to the plantlife around him, openly admiring it. "My wife had one like that," he said, "then some damn bugs moved in on it, and she had to get rid of it."

"Sometimes it's the only thing you can do," said Mr. Hotchkiss.



a NEW short-short by
LAWRENCE TREAT

The prodigal nephew returns . . .

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

by LAWRENCE TREAT

One of the guards in the uniform of a deputy sheriff rang the front doorbell of the large, brick, Georgian mansion, and the three men stood there waiting, with the handcuffed man between them. None of them spoke until the door opened and the maid stood there, staring.

"Oh, Mr. Richard!" she exclaimed.

The tall curly-haired man in the center bit his lips. "How is she?" he asked. "How is my aunt?"

"The same. She's weak, terribly weak, but her mind's still clear and she's able to sit up in a chair."

"Good," he said. "Don't tell her about this." He raised his hands a few inches. "Do you suppose I can see her?"

"Come in," the maid said. "I'll speak to the nurse. Would you wait in the parlor, Mr. Richard?"

He nodded, and the three men stepped inside. Richard Wendell motioned to the right and they entered the big living room. Even the guards realized that the simple Adam furniture came from no mass-production factory.

Wendell, half smiling as he surveyed the room so familiar to him—the oil paintings, the highly polished tables, the dip of the heavy velvet drapes—made no comment. He was still lost in some nostalgic mood when the maid returned with the nurse.

"I'm Miss Olsen," the nurse said. "Mrs. Wendell often talks about you and wonders where you are. I think she'll be glad to see you, but please—not like this."

"Got to keep the bracelets on," the big guard said gruffly. "Regulations."

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"It will be a shock to her," the nurse said.

"Don't worry," Wendell said. "I'll keep a handkerchief over my hands, I'll tell her I had an accident, a bad burn. I certainly don't want her to know."

"That isn't the way a burn is treated," Miss Olsen said.

"Maybe not," Wendell said, "but she's not going to realize that, is she?"

"I'll tell her you're coming," Miss Olsen said. "I'll prepare her, and I'll have you called in five or ten minutes."

"Good," Wendell said. "I just want her to know I'm all right and that I'm still fond of her."

"I'm sure you are," Miss Olsen said. "But don't stay too long. Not more than fifteen minutes."

"Whatever is best for her," Wendell said. "She's the one to consider, not me."

Miss Olsen nodded. As soon as she had left the room, Wendell turned to his guards. "Let me loose," he said, and held out his hands.

The guards unlocked the handcuffs and refastened one pair on Wendell's wrist. He stared at his hands.

"Now I'm beginning to feel at home," he said, "in the house of my dear aunt, Mrs. Rowena Wendell, widow of a wealthy industrialist and about to remake her will in favor of that beloved nephew of hers who has come back and is finally going straight." He smiled broadly. "The dear sweet woman—she'll inspire me to better things. The wonderful example of her stalwart courage in the face of death, her unparalleled will to—"

"Cut the speeches," the big guard said.

"Don't you like them? I'm just practising up for the big moment and trying to get into the right mood. But how would a couple of screws like you understand things like that?"

The guard shrugged and moved back. He was watching warily, as if afraid his prisoner would try to escape, when Miss Olsen returned to the room. She was carrying a roll of bandages and some adhesive.

"I thought I'd better do a professional-looking job," she said. "Mrs. Wendell is still keen—she notices more than you'd expect."

Wendell held out his hands. "Thanks for warning me," he said. "I'll do my part."

"I hope so," she said, as she wound the bandages with quick deft motions.

"Leave my hands free," Wendell said. "I want to be able to touch her. I'm not going to stand on the other side of the room and just look at her. Not after all these years."

"I'm doing the best I can," Miss Olsen said. "Just be careful not to move your hands too much or the bandage may slip off. I'll take you upstairs now." She turned to the guards. "You can stay down here."

The big guard shook his head. "Oh, no," he said. "Our job is to bring him here and then bring him back. We're not taking any chances."

"Then you can stand outside the door," Miss Olsen said. "And don't worry about his jumping out of the window. It's locked."

"Good," the guard said. "Let's go."

The room in which the old lady sat had a wall of photographs, obviously of members of her family, from infancy to adulthood. Wendell noted with satisfaction that his own pictures were still prominent. Then he crossed the room and knelt next to his aunt's chair.

"Aunt Rowena," he said, "I heard you were sick and I had to come. I kept thinking of how wonderful you always were to me, how—" His voice broke and he lowered his head.

She reached out to fondle his hair. "Little curly-head," she said softly. "You always were my favorite, even though there was a wild streak in you. If you'd only put your talents to better use, you could have gone far. But you broke my heart, and now—"

"Aunt Rowena!" he said, and impulsively he reached up, disturbing the bandages and baring his handcuffs.

"Richard!" she exclaimed. "You—they didn't tell me."

"I didn't want you to know," he said. "But they let me come here, with a couple of guards, just for this visit." He gulped and drew in his lips, trying to hold back the sobs. "But I'll be free in a couple of months, and there's a girl—she's good, really she is, and she's waiting for me. No more shady things for me. I'm going straight this time. Set up a radio shop, start out the way Uncle Ed did. I won't make as much money as he did, I don't even want to, but if I can only scrape up a few dollars to start, I'll get along. I know I will. With Ruth. I only wish you could meet her."

"Perhaps you'll bring her here," the old lady said.

Wendell nodded. "Yes. As soon as I'm out. But they tell me—" He broke off again.

"They tell you I won't last very long," she said, "and they're

probably right. I know what's happening to me." She touched his head again and let her fingers run through his hair. "I'm tired," she said. "I think you'd better go now."

He kissed her hands and then stood up slowly. He kept his head low as he walked slowly from the room.

The guards were waiting outside, and downstairs in the parlor they handcuffed themselves to him. They left the house as they'd come in, a prisoner handcuffed to a pair of uniformed guards from the sheriff's office. And thus, in step, they walked out to the car. There the big guard unlocked himself and got behind the wheel. He drove a short distance, parked on a side street, then turned around and began taking off his uniform.

"Did it work?" he asked.

Wendell laughed. "You should have seen me. I told you what an actor I am, didn't I? She swallowed the story whole. She thinks the only reason I haven't seen her in so long is that I was in prison, but that I managed to get permission to come see her. And she thinks I have a good honest girl waiting for me when I get out. Just wait till I tell Jenny about that! I don't figure on getting the whole estate, but I ought to be in for a hundred grand or so, and I bet she's making me an heir right now."

He would, however, have lost the bet, for, before he'd even left the house, the old lady spoke to the nurse.

"Look out the window," Mrs. Wendell said, "and find out the numbers on their license plate, then phone the police and tell them to stop the car and arrest two men for impersonating police officers."

"Oh, Mrs. Wendell!" the nurse said. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I am! That whole visit was just an act to get money out of me. But the poor boy never did pay attention to details. His suntan, and then the trace of lipstick on his collar—you don't get those in prison, do you?" And the old lady sighed. "I think I'd better cut him out of my will. And right now, before it's too late."

"Q"

a short story by
JOHN D. MacDONALD

"There was a curiously unreal flavor about the situation. It was something you knew could happen. But it never did. Until right now . . ."

A cool crisp crime story by the creator of Travis McGee . . .

MAN IN A TRAP

by **JOHN D. MacDONALD**

When Joe Conroy walked from the supermarket to his parked car with the bag of groceries on a late Saturday afternoon, he looked at the black sky in the west and hoped the rain would hold off until he could get the grass cut. He was a gangling, freckled man, part owner and manager of a small and profitable trucking line. He put the groceries in the back on the floor and got behind the wheel.

As he looked back over his left shoulder, preparing to back out, the car door on the other side opened. He turned his head in time to see a big man step into the car quickly and pull the door shut.

The man was blond and in his twenties. His forehead and nose were peeling from recent sunburn. His features were heavy and brutal. He wore jeans, a pale blue sports shirt, and a cheap-looking dark blue corduroy jacket. He held a small automatic pistol in his right hand. He held it low, with the barrel aimed at Joe Conroy's waist. He brought a whisky smell into the car, and a smell of perspiration.

"What do you want?" Joe asked, and was pleased because his voice sounded a lot more calm than he felt.

The man moved closer and suddenly slapped the barrel against the point of Joe's knee. It hurt.

"Hey!"

"This is real, ole buddy. You just drive. Go west on Oak and

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turn north at the boulevard light. Take it nice and easy and careful. I'm a nervous man today."

"You can get in a lot of—"

"No talk. Drive."

Joe did as he was told. He had long since decided he was not the hero type. When they said hands up, Joe's hands would go up. When they said turn around, he'd turn around. A big dead hero would be no help to Marty and the kids.

There was a curiously unreal flavor about the situation. It was something you knew could happen. But it never did. Until right now. Bang on the brakes and bust his head against the windshield. Sure. And if you lived maybe they'd let you keep the slugs they took out of you. On the mantel, mounted in plastic.

"How far?"

The gun barrel hit him on the knee again. "Just drive, dad." The blond man was as tensely alert as an animal.

Joe saw where he had made a mistake when he had dreamed up such an incident. You imagined the criminal would be somebody you could reason with. This man was big, ugly, irrational, and unpredictable.

Ten miles north of the city he said, "Turn in up there on the right. That Sundown Motel." After Joe had turned in, he said, "Now all the way to the end. Park on the far side of that Ford. Take the keys out and put them in my little hot hand. Okay. Now pick up your groceries. Use both hands. Now walk ahead of me right to that door. Number 20. Good. Now stand still. And don't try any funny stuff."

He rapped on the door, five sharp raps, closely spaced.

"Ray?" It was a woman's voice.

"Open up."

The door opened inward. Ray prodded him at the base of the spine with the gun barrel. "Go on in."

The woman backed away from the door, staring at Joe Conroy with surprise and, he thought, alarm. She was a lean-faced, full-mouthed blonde with a short hairdo. She wore a white blouse, and dark-red, shiny bullfighter pants. She was barefoot, and her ankles looked soiled. She had a very slim waist, long, heavy legs.

A man bounded off one of the beds and pushed the woman out of the way roughly. Ray had kicked the door shut. The man was about the same age as Ray. He had glossy black hair worn full and long, and sideburns down to the corners of a narrow jaw. He

was in blue and white plaid underwear shorts. There was a half crescent of lipstick on his chin. His chest was hairless. His arms were long and powerful.

"Is there anything you can't foul up?" he demanded of Ray. "Just one lousy little thing?"

"Get off my back, Diz. I figured it all out."

"You're a big brain now, already."

"Look, Diz. I found a couple I could have took easy, so what happens? The car gets listed as hot maybe ten minutes later, and every prowler in town has it on the list and with the luck we've been running, they grab us off. So I figure this way. Take the car and the driver too. See? That means it isn't reported stole. Isn't that using the old head?"

Diz gave Ray a look of intense disgust. "That's using the old head," he said. He sat down on the bed, heavily, reached the bottle on the night stand and splashed whiskey into a glass.

"So what's the matter?" Ray demanded, looking from the girl to the man.

"Tell him, Lauralee," Diz said.

"This is the matter, lambie pie. Suppose it doesn't go real, real smooth. Suppose somebody has to go bang-bang. Then your new friend has a long talk with the fuzz. Descriptions, stupid."

Ray turned and stared indignantly at Joe Conroy. After a time his expression cleared. "So okay, then. Who's stupid? If the deal goes sour, then it don't make any difference we kill this one, too, does it?"

"If it's any help to you . . ." Joe said.

"Shut up!" Diz said. "Throw me his wallet, stupid."

"You stop climbing on my back," Ray grumbled. He took Joe's wallet out of his hip pocket and threw it to Diz.

Diz looked in it. "You're up to par, Ray. Four bucks." He took the identification cards out, and the photographs Joe carried. "Joseph T. Conroy," he said. "Hello, Joe. Wife and kids. And about two hours from now the wife gets so itchy she calls the cops. What the hell is the car? A thirty-seven jalopy or something?"

"No, it's a good car, Diz, honest. Look out the window. It's a new four-door job with five thousand on it and a full tank. It ought to roll."

"Says here you're manager of Pyramid Trucking Lines, Conroy. Ever get called back to the office?"

"Sometimes."

Diz turned to Lauralee. "You hold stupid's hand while Joe and I wander up to the booth and make us a phone call." He put on trousers, shoes, and a jacket, slipped a gun into the jacket pocket. "Put that sack down someplace, Joe. Let's go."

Once they were outside he said, "Nothing funny now. I'm going to hear both ends of this little chat. You met a guy from the office. Something has come up. Make up something logical. You'll have to work late."

The booth was outside the motel office. Diz crowded in with Joe. The phone rang three times before Marty answered.

"Yes?"

"It's Joe, honey. Look, something came up. I checked at the terminal and I've got to go back for a while."

"Will you kids hush! I can't hear your father. Did you say you have to go back to work? What's the trouble?"

"Usual thing. Too many rigs down, and we'll have to dig up a lease someplace to keep from faulting on a contract."

"Did you get the groceries?"

"Yes."

"Well, can't you bring them home before you go back?"

"This is sort of an emergency, hon."

"You sound funny, Joe. Is anything wrong?"

"No. Everything is fine."

"Danny, stop screeching! Mommie can't hear. Will you be late?"

"I guess so."

"The Shermans were coming over after dinner."

"Well, you better call Liz and cancel, hon."

"You make sure you get something to eat, now. You're sure everything is all right?"

With enormous false heartiness he said, "Everything is dandy. I'm just a little worried about the contract. See you, honey."

"Goodbye, darling."

He was sweating as he hung up. The conversation had been like a little window open on a sane and normal world. As soon as he hung up he was back in a fantasy place inhabited by Diz, by Ray, and by Lauralee. He wiped his brow, waiting.

"That was just fine, Joe boy. You're being real cool. Now suppose she tries to phone you at the terminal? Think she will?"

"I . . . I guess she might. To remind me to eat."

"Then they better be ready to say you stepped out for a couple of minutes. Who can you call there?"

"Henry Gluckman, the dispatcher."

"Well, leave us do so, ole Joe."

Henry seemed baffled by Joe's request at first, and then he suddenly seemed to understand. "I get it, Mr. Conroy. Sure thing. Have a ball, Mr. Conroy."

Joe hung up and said, "He thinks I've got a woman lined up."

"It happens every day, Uncle Joe. Let's go back. I like you about a half step in front of me. Good."

They went back into the room. It was a setup usually called family accommodations. Two rooms and a bath. Ray was scowling down into a stiff highball. Diz went over and took it lightly out of his hand, and when Ray looked up in sharp annoyance, reaching to retrieve the glass, Diz said, "No more sauce, stupid. You might get another genius-type idea."

"I told him to lay off," Lauralee said.

"Shut up!" Ray barked at her.

"Watch Uncle Joe," Diz said. He went into the next room and came back with a roll of black tar tape. Joe Conroy was instructed to sit on the floor by the radiator, encircle a pipe with his arms, and clasp his hands. Diz wound his wrists and hands with the tape. Each encirclement made tighter pressure.

They don't do this, Joe thought. They tie you to a chair and you work the ropes loose. Nobody works this stuff loose. This is going to be a long day.

Once he was secure, they ignored him. They unfolded a road map on the bed and went over it carefully. Diz was the leader. He gave the orders. There was another piece of paper. Joe judged from the conversation that it was a sketch of a building.

"We spot the car here, motor running, lights out, Lauralee at the wheel. They close at eleven. They have the night deposit made up by midnight. Two of them take it in, the manager and some kind of clerk. They come out the back. Their car is parked here. We'll be between the car and the hedge.

"Now get this, Ray. The minute we hit is when the fat one shoves the key in the car door. The other one will be holding the money bag. You come around the front, fast, gun in the left hand, blackjack in the right. And for God's sake, hit him right, not too hard and not too soft. I'll take the fat one.

"Then we unlock the car and dump them in so nobody sees them laying around. We throw the car keys into the yard and walk—get that—walk to Conroy's car. I'll take the wheel,

Lauralee. You be ready to shove over. Ray, you'll have the money. You get in the back."

"How much do you think there'll be?" Lauralee asked with a husky wistfulness.

"From the business they do, someplace between fifteen and twenty-five thousand."

"It's about time," Ray mumbled.

"Six weeks and all we've done is pay, expenses," Diz said. "Somebody is a jinx."

"Don't look at me," Ray said. "We did good until you picked her up, Diz."

"If I drop anybody, I drop you. Maybe I drop you after we split this one, stupid."

"I can do good by myself."

"You do fine. Big operations. Mug jobs."

Ray shrugged. "How about dads?"

"If it's smooth we leave him here and they find him when they come to change the sheets. If it goes sour . . . we decide later."

"I feel all empty in the middle," Lauralee said.

Diz rumbled her hair. "That's the name of the game, sweetheart. That's the kick."

She kissed him thoroughly, kneading his back. "How'll I look in mink?" she said.

"Like any other mink," Ray said.

Diz and the girl got up and went into the other room, arms around each other's waists. The door closed softly behind them. Ray got the bottle and poured himself a drink.

"From what I've heard—"

"Shut up, dad."

"I've heard that when you people team up with a woman, things go bad for you."

Ray got up and came around the bed. Holding his drink carefully so as not to spill it, he kicked Joe in the ribs with a full hard swing of his leg. Joe felt the bone go and the pain sickened him. It shamed him to sit on the floor and be kicked like an animal. And for the first time he felt a true and genuine anger.

Ray sat on the bed again. "Just don't talk," he said. "Just don't say word one."

Each time Joe drew breath pain was a knife in his side. I should have started being a man when I had the chance, Joe thought. That kick could have killed me. It could have driven a

splintered edge of bone into the lungs. Then Diz would have been very happy with Ray. Delighted with him.

And he began to have a vague idea. As it took more definite shape, he liked it better. If he merely endured, the choice was not good. The men with the money would be armed and wary. This trio had the smell of defeat about them. If they killed one of the men, they would kill the other and come back and kill him. It would not go smoothly for them. Not with Ray drinking heavily. And the only chance seemed to be to increase the dissension between them.

He found the first step of his plan astoundingly hard to accomplish. He caught a fold of the inside of his cheek between his teeth, and for long moments he did not have the courage to do as he wished. Finally, bracing himself against the expected pain, he bit down as powerfully as he could and tasted the flow of blood into his mouth.

He chewed again and again, and then slumped over against the floor and made himself breathe in a heavy rasping way and let the blood run onto the floor. He kept his eyes closed. He heard Ray come over to him. The big hand took him by the shoulder and shook him roughly.

"Hey! Hey! Wake up!" Ray whispered.

Joe breathed in the same way. There was a long silence. Ray moved away from him.

"Hey, Diz."

"Go away, stupid."

"Diz, come here a minute."

"Shut up, Ray."

"Diz, you got to come here a minute."

Joe heard the door open finally and knew that they had come over to him.

"What the hell happened?" Diz demanded, his voice taut with anger.

"I just kicked him a little. One time. Honest. He was talking too much."

"Oh, you slob! Oh, you stupid, crazy jerk!"

Joe heard the quick suck of breath and knew the girl had come over and seen him. "He's . . . bleeding."

"The genius kicked him. He probably busted up his insides. The guy may be dying."

"I . . . I don't like this," Lauralee said. "I don't like it."

"A nice juicy kidnap murder," Diz said. "In this state they gas you. They drop it in a bucket under a chair."

"Honest, Diz, I only—"

There was a sudden brutal splat of fist on flesh and something heavy fell against a bed and slid sideways.

"You didn't have to do that," Ray said, his voice muffled.

"What're we gonna do?" Lauralee said, and Joe detected hysteria in her voice. He made his breathing more ragged.

"Lemme think," Diz said. "He may be going out right now."

"We ought to get a doctor," Lauralee said.

"That's a wonderful idea. That's a real good idea. The kind Ray has all the time."

"Maybe we ought to anyway cut him loose and put him on the bed," the girl said. "Look at him bleed!"

They unwound the tape from his hands. He kept himself utterly limp. They carried him to the bed and put him down clumsily.

"Go get a towel or something," Diz said.

"I just gave him one little kick in the ribs," Ray said wonderingly.

"Shut up. I got to think. If he dies, we'll have to get him out of here. He'll have to be dumped someplace."

"I didn't know I was going to get into anything like this. I don't like this," Lauralee whined.

"Maybe he's faking," Ray said. "Give me that cigarette, honey," Diz said.

Joe Conroy braced himself. He did not know where the pain would begin. It began on the back of his left hand. It was bright pain, fierce and sharp. He fought against the instinctive reflex. It lasted a little longer than forever, and finally stopped.

"He's not faking," Diz said. "He's in bad shape."

"If it's going to happen anyway, let's finish it," Ray said.

"No!" Lauralee cried.

"Shut up, honey. Who says it's going to happen anyway? I'm no doctor. You want a murder rap against you, Ray? Stop having ideas. Give me a chance to think."

"It's driving me nuts, listening to him," Ray said.

"Go in the other room and shut the door."

"I want to know what—"

"Move, will you!"

"Okay, okay, okay." Joe heard the door slam.

"What are you going to do?" the girl whispered nervously.

"Ray goofed it up. But I need him tonight. We can get along without you. You stay here with Conroy. Then we'll come back here. Dead or not, we'll take Conroy along. We'll find a side road and I'll have Ray help me drag him off in the brush. And . . . when I come back to the car, I'll be alone."

"No, Diz!"

"Think of a better way. I can leave the gun in Conroy's hand. It'll confuse the law. And we'll switch cars as soon as we can."

"I'm scared."

"Don't be scared. Diz will fix everything nice for baby."

It was a sizable slice of eternity before the two men left. He heard his car drive away. Diz, before he left, had taped Joe's wrists and ankles. Joe opened his eyes and groaned. The girl came over to the bed.

"Water," he gasped.

"Okay. I'll get some." She came back with a glass. She held his head up and held the glass to his lips. "You know, I was a nurse's aide once. I was going to go into nurse training, but it was too tough, you know what I mean? I'm sorry about Ray kicking you."

He clasped his fingers together. "Fix the pillow. Please," he gasped.

"Sure thing." She put the empty glass aside. Joe felt vastly guilty about what he was about to do. He had never struck a woman in his life. And he knew he could not be half-hearted about it.

His wrists were fastened together in front of him. She reached around him to tug at the pillow. He watched her chin carefully. When he judged it was in perfect position, he brought his clasped hands up as hard and as quickly as he could.

The force of the blow straightened her up and she fell against the other bed and bounced onto the floor. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. She came up onto her hands and knees, face bleared and dazed. As she started to push herself up, he struck her again, swinging his clasped hands sideways, striking the angle of her jaw.

He tried to hop to the door, but he lost his balance and fell. He wriggled the rest of the way, knelt and caught the knob, pulled himself up, unlocked the door, and hopped out into the night yelling as loudly as he could. He hopped four times and fell into the driveway, still hollering, as doors opened, and people were running . . .

At one in the morning, after the police surgeon had taped his cracked rib and packed the wound on the inside of his mouth, Detective Lieutenant Halverson, small and trim, came in as Joe Conroy was putting his shirt back on.

"Delivered the car to your wife. Told her I'd bring you home, but she's going to get a sitter somehow and come down for you."

"You got them, then."

Halverson leaned against a file cabinet and lit a cigarette. "Wouldn't have, if you hadn't overheard the name of the supermarket they were going to knock off. When we put the floods on them they got rattled. So the girl is in a cell, and the big blond punk is in the police morgue, and the one with the sideburns is on the operating table. We don't have the history yet, but it will be coming through soon. Now I've got time for your end of the story."

Joe told him—and the words came hard.

Halverson nodded when he finished. "Smart," he said.

"I'm a real hero," Joe said. "She was being a roadshow Florence Nightingale and I sucker-punched her beautifully."

"So you wish you'd tried to climb the boys instead, so Monday your wife could be picking out a box with bronze handles?"

"Not that. But . . ."

"I know what you mean. Both papers want to talk to you. How will you handle it?"

"I managed to get away. That's enough."

And that's all he told them. But he told Marty all of it. And he didn't start to shake with reaction until he was at last home and safe, and then he took the pills he hadn't thought he would need.

Sunday, except for all the phone calls, was like any other Sunday. Almost like any other Sunday. Just like every day from now on would be almost like the days that had gone before. With one little exception. For Joe Conroy life had become a little more valuable because it could not so readily be taken for granted.

There was evil loose in the world, random and brutal as summer lightning. And this time his luck had been like a coin found in the street. He read the funnies to the kids, and, with an awkward gladness, kissed Marty more often than was his habit.

"Q"

a **NEW** bicentennial story by

S. S. RAFFERTY

The third story in our bicentennial series takes us back to Annapolis in the colony of Maryland in 1750. Maryland, the author tells us, had "a fierce regional pride in its culinary customs. The do's and don'ts of various dishes take on a fanatical fervor. Many people-considered H. L. Mencken an iconoclast, but not when it came to Maryland food and cooking."

But cookery is not the main theme of this third bicentennial story. "The heart of the matter" is Geddies Silver and the patent thereon granted by the first Lord Baltimore, "who had that power since he operated under a Royal Charter." It is up to Captain Jeremy Cork, the pre-Revolutionary War detective who specialized in "social puzzles," to save a family fortune and protect an honorable name by solving the mystery of the Geddies Patent . . .

THE BRIGHT SILVER OF MARYLAND

by **S. S. RAFFERTY**

The reasons for our peregrinations about the colonies are usually too little tied to business dealings and too often spurred by Captain Jeremy Cork's involvement with what he calls "social puzzles." As his financial yeoman, my main dedication is to make him the wealthiest man in the Americas, while his bent, indeed his avocation, is to be perpetually concerned with the solution of crimes. These expeditions invariably bring us into contact with all manner of devious and unscrupulous persons.

Our arrival in Annapolis in the spring of 1750 was neither for crime nor commerce; we had come to eat terrapin. That may sound frivolous, but if you knew the nature of my employer, you would see it as just another jig-a-jot on his journey to perdition.

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But in the depths of me, I know that he will probably escape Lucifer's last grasp, and not by a penitent deathbed plea, mind you. Oh, no, Cork will talk his way out of Hades and charm his way into Heaven, and I intend to be right at his side to take advantage of the moment and slip into glory unnoticed.

This annual terrapin orgy has become ritualized for us over the years, and the most important part of the liturgy is our argument with Silas Randall, the owner of the Terrapin Inn on Dock Street. Randall is an even-tempered fellow of great girth and hearty hospitality. Yet his patience is tested whenever Cork shows up and puts sherry in his terrapin. To the people of the Maryland colony that is heresy.

"I hope, Mr. Oaks, that the Captain will not insist on the sherry this year," Randall said to me as I was unpacking in our rooms. Cork was below stairs showing a new barkeep how to make Apple Knock, a potation of his own invention, and not recommended for the faint-hearted.

"I would not mention it," I said, shaking my head. "It will only make him more obstinate. Remember, he once threatened to use madeira."

Randall closed his eyes and shuddered.

"Of course, he only said that," I added quickly to lessen the sting, "to bring you to heel about the sherry."

As we talked, Cork entered, stooping as usual to get his six-foot-six frame through the doorway. He was carrying a tray with a large pitcher and three tankards on it. Setting his burden on a table, he poured us each a drink of the Apple Knock, its heady aroma already filling the room.

"Good health, mine host," Cork toasted, lifting the tankard, "and who would Rutherford P. White be?"

The innkeeper quaffed his liquor and smacked his lips. "Excellent, Captain, truly excellent. I would not dare stray from your personal receipt. It would be a blasphemy."

I could see Randall's sly drift towards a touchy subject, but I feared it was only a hare out to trap a fox.

"My dear Randall," Cork said, taking a chair, "I am not a constructor of Procrustean beds."

Randall looked over at the bed in a corner of the room and then turned back to Cork with a confused expression on his normally jolly face.

"Not *that* bed, sir," Cork chuckled. "Although, when you con-

sider my height, all beds are Procrustean. You have not read your Greek mythology, I see. Procrustes was a fabulous giant who stretched or shortened his captives to make them fit one of his iron beds. But I use the phrase figuratively to mean any arbitrary standard to which an exact conformity is forced. You make a Procrustean bed of your method for eating terrapin, with no regard for personal tastes. I do not make that claim for Apple Knock. Now, who is Rutherford P. White?"

Poor Randall, the hare, had been defeated, and he retreated from the argument. I suspect that he did so hoping not to goad Cork into breaking other house taboos, such as never putting cream gravy directly on fried chicken, but restricting it to the attendant johnnycake.

"Rutherford P. White?" Randall stroked his chin in thought. "Oh, yes—a young fellow, a lawyer. From Philadelphia, I believe. Just opened an office here."

I sent my eyes heavenward. With lawyers come lawbreakers, and lawbreaking is criminal, and anything criminal is Cork's delight.

"Word travels swiftly in your Annapolis, Randall. We have not been here an hour, and a boy handed me a note from this White saying he would stop by this afternoon."

"Well, I did mention around the public taproom that you would be visiting the neighbourhood, sir, and he might have heard me. Your name is not unknown hereabouts since you took a hand in the Bristol Herring affair."

Well, I was at least happy to know that we got some celebrity out of the case; we got little else except the chills and fever I suffered from spending two nights in an open rowboat while Cork was tracking down a cutthroat.

Cork spent the next two hours before White's arrival playing dice with himself. He has a theory that, if he throws them enough times and carefully records each outcome, he will find a pattern on which he can rely for making bets. *This*, to him, is industry at work. Paying attention to the spermacite candle factory he owns in Rhode Island, or spending some time at the copper mine up on the Hudson, not to mention the ship he owns and never sails in—all those things are mere incidentals.

It was close to three o'clock—or more accurately, two pitchers of Apple Knock and a thousand tosses of the dice later—when Rutherford P. White was shown into our rooms.

He was pleasant-looking enough, with fair hair and slate-blue eyes, but certainly he lacked the reserve and maturity so necessary in the legal trade. He tried to appear convincing by carrying the green bag which is a symbol of his calling.

"Captain Cork," he said enthusiastically, "I am delighted to meet you." He shook Cork's hand like a pump handle. "I believe you have the acquaintance of my uncle, Thomas Crosley, of Philadelphia. He has told me about you and your exploits over the years. Fascinating, simply fascinating." He went on in a rapid, almost breathless, pace, convincing me that his courtroom style was probably based more on bombast than expertness.

Cork offered him some Apple Knock, and asked what he could do for him. It turned out that he wanted not only the moon, but several stars as well.

"When I heard you would be in Annapolis, Captain, I saw it as an answer to an unspoken prayer. You may be able to help save a family fortune and a venerable reputation as well."

"Gold and honour have a way of cancelling each other out," Cork said, "but let's have the particulars."

The young man smiled. "Silver, sir, not gold, is at the bottom of the problem. Geddies Silver, to be exact. You have heard of it, of course."

"And who has not? The Geddies name has been in the forefront of silversmithing for years. The Geddies family discovered some method for producing a silver that is brighter than any other and less apt to tarnish," I put in.

"Correct, Mr. Oaks. It was discovered by old Farley Geddies back at the turn of the century, and has been kept a close family secret from father to son. Trevor Geddies, my client, is the last remaining Geddies, and now heads the firm. I am here on his behalf because he is in danger of losing the fortune that took almost fifty years to amass. Of more concern to him is the fact that, if the charges are true, his grandfather, so well remembered as an honourable man, will be branded a thief."

"Formal charges? I assume someone accuses the elder Geddies of stealing the process," Cork said.

"No, nothing formal yet, but Oliver Dunne threatens to go to law, and I fear his case is painfully clear. Let me start at the beginning. Five days ago, a young man named Oliver Dunne arrived from London, and claimed that his grandfather, David Dunne, had discovered the process for 'bright silver,' as it is called. I

say he 'claimed,' gentlemen, but it is more accurate to say he *proved* it.

"He had in his possession a journal kept by his grandfather in his youth. The book had been lying, unnoticed and unread, in a trunk all these years. An entry for 4 August, 1707 gives a detailed explanation for making 'bright silver.'"

"Two questions, Mr. White," Cork said. "Is the method in Dunne's journal correct, and does not Geddies have a patent?"

"I'll answer the second one first, for that's the problem. Old Farley received a patent from the first Lord Baltimore on 10 December, 1708 in gratitude for some handsome silver plates that were presented to him. The patent does not divulge the actual process. It merely says: 'a method known only to the Geddies family.' It was granted for four lifetimes in the Geddies family. I have shown the method described in the Dunne journal to Trevor Geddies, and he admits, in confidence, that it is correct in every particular."

"But why did Dunne's grandfather let his process lie fallow all these years?" I asked.

"Because he died before he could use it. Now, here is the important point, as far as I am concerned. He died aboard ship while returning to England on 14 August, 1707. He left from Annapolis. The Geddies firm kept accurate records, and I went back over the years and found that David Dunne's name and signature are in their paybook from 5 July to 9 August, 1707."

"Aha," I chuckled. "He stole the secret and was going to England to exploit it."

"More likely the Continent, Oaks," Cork injected. "But your charge of theft also works in the reverse, does it not? It could be said that Dunne did indeed discover the method, and it was usurped by Farley Geddies."

"Precisely, Captain Cork," White said.

"Tell me, Mr. White, how is the method applied in the Geddies shop? Are the workmen involved?"

"No, sir, and never have been. Each succeeding Geddies used it alone in a locked room. Of course, I can't describe the process, but it has to do with adding certain chemicals to the molten silver."

"The Dunne signature in the paybook was compared with the holograph in the journal?" Cork wanted to know.

"Yes, of course. Forgery was our first suspicion. I had two expert calligraphers study the pages of the journal, masking only

the portions of the pages that detailed the process. They are positive the signature and the writing are in the same hand. Further, three different papermakers are convinced that the paper in the journal was made in the colonies in the early 1700's."

Cork smiled at White and complimented him. "You are very thorough, sir. Now, how precisely is the Geddies' copy of the process recorded? Certainly old Farley would not have trusted it to memory."

"It is carefully noted in a copybook which is kept in a locked box. Of course, over the years, each Geddies has learned it by heart, so the box is seldom out of safekeeping."

"And this copybook has no mention of date?"

"None at all."

"Strange. The old-time artisans were quite careful, and I would say the original Geddies certainly was."

"How can you know that?" I asked.

"Because he kept detailed paybook records, and his orderliness has been passed on to his heirs, since those old documents, though of little value, are still extant."

"Absolutely correct, Captain," White assured him. "Trevor tells me that, before their deaths, both his father and grandfather were terrors about keeping meticulous records."

"Yes, blood will tell. But how about the lineage of the Dunne family?"

"If his journal is any guide, David Dunne was a restless fellow. He left England shortly after his marriage in 1705 and was an itinerant silversmith in Boston, Philadelphia, and then here in Annapolis. He didn't even seem to know that he had fathered the child who became Oliver's father."

We all turned to a knock on the door. Cork called, "Come in," and it opened to admit Host Randall and a spare, dark-haired fellow who was dressed rather gaudily, like a strolling player.

"Ah, *there* you are, White," the man said, coming into the room. "I've been scampering all over this dusty town looking for you."

White introduced him as Oliver Dunne; but that was obvious from his London Cheapside accent. He nodded to me and then said to Cork, "Captain? You don't look like a toy soldier."

Cork ignored the thrust and said, "Randall, another pitcher, please. Pray sit down, Mr. Dunne. White has been telling us of your lucky find."

"Well, I hope it's lucky. Damnedest thing, the old rascal being a

genius, isn't it? My old gramdma'm would be twirling in her grave if she knew the family fortune has been gathering dust in an old trunk for forty years. She didn't speak very well of the old governor, she didn't."

"Are you a silversmith, Mr. Dunne?" Cork asked. I could tell he didn't care for the fellow, and was watching for a trap.

"Me?" He laughed aloud. "Ollie Dunne a silversmith? No, sir, rags is my calling. Ragmonger. That's how I come to find the journal. Poking around in my ma'm's things after the funeral. I was looking for old cloth that might bring a price. Well, upsy-daisy-Scarborough-Fair, there it is, in a pile of old clothes that must have come back with the old man's body long ago. My own old man never bothered with the stuff, the fool. Here them Geddies been making a fortune off the sweat of old Dave's brow all these years."

"How did you know that you were looking at the secret of Geddies Silver, Mr. Dunne, since you are not a silversmith?"

"Ah, you're a sly one, Captain," Dunne said, winking. "I didn't know. But the Geddies name was mentioned in the journal, and we've heard of Geddies Silver in London. Well, Ollie, I says to myself, you may have something here in your hands, me boy. So I goes to a solicitor and he checks the Royal Patents. Then he finds a record of the Lord Baltimore grant, but the thing is dated almost a year and a half after the entry in my grandfather's journal. Well, here I am, and from the look on Mr. White's face, I think I have a good case. Geddies hasn't admitted that the methods are the same, but I'll wager they are. How do you and Mr. Oaks stand in this, Captain?"

"Mr. White and I have mutual friends. But I am curious. If you were proved true, what would you consider a fair settlement?"

Dunne broke into a broad smile, showing two missing teeth. "Now, that's the talk I like to hear! Well, I'm a fair fellow. I could take everything, I suppose. But why be a hog? Now what would I do with a silversmith's shop? No, for me, Captain, it's a healthy slice of all the coin that's been made in the last forty years, and a large nip of the yearly take from now on. Mr. White, I've been waiting now for five days, and I can't sit no longer. If I don't have an answer by to-night, I'll have to go to law in the morning."

Dunne got to his feet, bid us good day, and was abruptly gone. Randall passed him as he brought more Apple Knock to the table.

Cork mused into his empty mug and said, "This is most in-

teresting. We have a forty-year-old crime to which all witnesses are dead, and yet they speak to us."

"Do you hear voices?" I asked.

"In a way. David Dunne gives us a picture of himself. He is a man with a reputable trade, yet he leaves England to come to the Americas. A man seeking advancement in silversmithing would find more fertile soil at home than in these climes, where most shops are rudimentary and have few customers of wealth. Remember, our forefathers were too busy breaking soil and abuilding to collect amenities. Yet here is a fellow who leaves a pregnant wife and goes off. From Oliver's description of his grandmother's feelings, I'm sure there was no love lost between them. Then, once here, David Dunne drifts about from city to city until he 'discovers' a process. Mr. White, you described him as restless, but I think it well might have been an inability to stay honest."

White nodded his head. "Of course, this is all conjecture, sir, and will do us very little good in court. I'm afraid we are done for."

"Dunne for, is more like it," I said, spelling out the name; but no one laughed.

"Possibly." Cork got up and stretched, which in itself is quite a sight. "But since we have had the advantage of meeting the Dunne offspring, perhaps we should now look at the Geddies issue."

The Geddies establishment was but a few blocks away, in Cornhill Street, and we walked there in the mildness of the afternoon.

It was a snug shop with two bow windows flanking the doorway. Travellers from the European continent are often shocked by the smallness of a colonial silversmith's shop and the lack of merchandise for sale about the place. I once had to explain to a visitor from the Lowlands that, since no silver is mined in the colonies and since the only sources are Spanish coins from the West Indies and the few English coins that filter through, converting the coins to decorative pieces is a practical method of protection.

A candlestick or a spoon is more recognizable than a common coin, if stolen. And, if coins are needed at some later date, the spoon or candlestick can be melted down and the coins struck. This, of course, by the authorized colonial Mint. Several silversmiths have swung for reversing the process and bypassing the Mint. Few Geddies creations made their way back into coins,

however, for the workmanship and, of course, the brightness, made them worth more than common pieces of eight.

I assumed it was the original shop of old Farley Geddies, for a weather-worn sign hung across the top of the windows that used the curious lettering I have often noticed on old sentimental establishments. It read:

DeLICate
siLversMithing

Trevor Geddies met us in his short sleeves and invited us back to a small nook that served as his office. He was a strongly built young man of 20-odd years, and mildly handsome. Two miniature portraits hung over his desk, showing the common features of the Geddies' line. Trevor, however, looked tired and worried in comparison with his forebears.

"I see no hope for us, Rutherford," he said to the lawyer, after being told of Dunne's visit and his demands. "The process in the journal is the very same as the one put down by my grandfather."

"Your grandsire was quite careful about records, it seems," Cork said. "Yet he did not date the paper on which the method was written."

"I never thought about it, Captain Cork. Until this came up. I always assumed that the 1708 date on the patent covered everything."

"But that is beguiling to me, Mr. Geddies. Let us make an assumption here. David Dunne came to work for old Farley, or young Farley then, in July of 1707, and left the next month. Do your records indicate why?"

"No, sir."

"Did Farley keep a diary of his own?"

"No, not to my knowledge. And we've searched everywhere."

"Well, let us go on with the assumption, which is that David Dunne somehow got access to the process which existed in the summer of 1707, or possibly before. Were any pieces made from Geddies Silver, the 'bright silver,' sold prior to July, 1707?"

"The first recorded pieces were the plates given to Lord Baltimore."

"Which were presented in December of 1708. But there could have been others. How long would it take to make the plates, Mr. Geddies?"

"In those days? Hmmm. Well, it was a twelve-piece setting with matching goblets, and of course, the hand engraving. Possibly a year. More, if not worked on full time."

"Excellent. So we know the method probably existed in December of 1707."

"But, Captain," White put in, "that proves nothing, since Dunne's journal reads 4 August, 1707—five months earlier."

"Yes, but let us stay with our assumption that Dunne was a thief. Now, would you say that the method is very complex one, involving ingredients that would have to be tested as to specific amounts in order to achieve the right mix?"

"Well, of course," Geddies said. "But I'm so familiar with it that it seems simple to me."

"So does the making of bread to any chit of a girl, sir. But the first loaf in creation—that was a different matter! Determining the right amounts of water, flour, and salt could have taken aeons. Now, your grandfather opened this shop in 1701—"

"How did you know that, sir? I didn't know it myself," White put in.

"It was 1701, Captain," Geddies told him. "In this very building."

"Of course." Cork was matter-of-fact. "And I am sure the first few years were lean?"

"Exceedingly so."

"But in the July of 1707 your grandfather hired another silversmith, so business must have been better, or its outlook rosier. A man enlarges his business with apprentices, and only hires a journeyman when the future is promising. Now I go back to my assumption. Farley, after months or possibly years, develops 'bright silver,' makes the Baltimore plates to ensure a patent, and hires a man equal to his skill to help with the project."

"But he does not know that his new journeyman is a scoundrel, and when Dunne suddenly departs for England, Farley is none the wiser that his secret method has been stolen. Do not ask me how, gentlemen. My assumption will not stretch that far. Now we have two documents in combat with each other: one clearly dated and the other not. May I see the Geddies method document, sir?"

Trevor shot a glance at Rutherford who, in turn, looked at Cork.

"Come, my dear fellow," the Captain said. "You have already admitted to Mr. White in confidence that the Dunne entry is cor-

rect, and he to me. If you stand where you are, the court will make you produce it, or you will lose by default."

With a solemn look on his face Trevor Geddies went to a back room and returned with a small metal box, banded in brass straps, and made fast with three separate locks.

He took one key from a chain around his neck and unlocked the first fastener. A second key was produced from his pocket, and the second lock was undone. A third key was ingeniously hidden in Trevor's ornate belt buckle, and it went into service with the third lock. With the box lid lifted, three pieces of faded copybook paper appeared. Cork took them gently into his hands and read each sheet carefully, scrutinizing each line of careful penmanship.

"As I thought, a simple task for you, but it must have taken years to arrive at. Your grandsire had a touch of the romantic about him, sir."

Trevor smiled for the first time, although weakly. "I call that Farley's Folly," he said. "But I guess it was of no help where Dunne was concerned."

Cork handed me the sheets and I smiled myself at the old silversmith's bent for the heroic. It read:

Verily
I Issue Venomous wrath
upon any Man Designing Calamity
for our Claim for Virtuous Initiality

The rest were instructions for preparing and adding elements, and signed by Farley Geddies, Silversmith.

"If he had only put the date after his name, as is the custom," I said, "and that date was prior to 4 August, 1707, we could tell Mr. Oliver Dunne to go fish in other waters."

"And so we can, Oaks." Cork took a breath and shook his head. "It's a shame that old Farley was so subtle, but then he never meant this document to substantiate his claim. He was merely having some fun."

"You mean he *has* put the date in there?" Trevor asked, snatching the paper from me.

"Of course, and you are saved, sir. He wrote that down on 5 July, 1706, a full year before Dunne was hired. Don't look so astounded, gentlemen. I have no genius, but I do have eyes. When I said the firm was founded in 1701, Mr. White showed surprise be-

cause he had not mentioned it to me. He didn't have to, because old Farley told everyone who passed his door. The sign on the front of the shop reads:

DeLiCate
siLvErSiMithing

and it is a chronogram, gentlemen, often used in old documents to conceal the date. You merely add the purposely capitalized letters which then represent Roman numerals. In the sign we have D, which equals 500, L equals 50, I equals one, C equals 100, L equals 50, and M equals 1000. Added together, they equal 1701. What is often taken for old-style lettering is really a chronogram.

"Now in Farley's case, he refined the practice. Note he ends with the word 'initiality,' when it might have been 'initiative' or 'invention.' But he says 'initiality,' so we take him at his word and add up all the initials, in terms of their values as Roman numerals. On the first line we have the V in Verily. V is five—the day of the month.

"The month itself is found in the capital letters beginning 'I Issue Venomous'—I plus I plus V equal seven, or July. Apply the same system to the last two lines, and you have M for 1000, D for 500, C for 100, another C for 100, V for 5, and I for one—or, all together, 1706."

"By jing," I cried. "You are a genius, a veritable wizard!" I noted that lawyer White looked a bit happier, but then his brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"But is this enough for the court?" he asked.

"Perhaps. But let us put more raisins into the bun. You have a family Bible, I trust, Mr. Geddies?"

Trevor Geddies looked insulted that anyone could think otherwise. Then his eyes lit up. "Of course, when a new child was born, Farley would always write some bit of verse after the new entry."

"Once a man acquires a little habit, he finds it often takes him over, and he uses it everywhere," Cork said. "Shall we look in the Bible, sir?"

To be sure, Cork's theory proved true, for the entries in the Bible in chronograms matched the birthdates of the children born before Farley's death. The entry for Trevor Geddies' father, George, read:

George—
 sound and lIVIng I
 Vouch
 thIs Comfort Comes,
 MaDe as heaven's conVival

George Geddies *was* born on 8 May, 1707, as was also borne out by a Baptismal record. Now even the legal-minded Mr. White was jubilant.

The good feeling did not abate there, but persisted, indeed grew full-blown, as we all sat down to dinner at Randall's that evening. Our host gingerly put the plates of terrapin before Cork and closed his eyes as the Captain reached for the sherry.

"Sherry in terrapin!" Trevor Geddies was appalled.

"Consider it a habit I have gotten into, sir. Like your grandfather's chronograms, it has taken me over."

That is surely not his only bad habit. There is this indulging in idleness, for one thing. I did, however, brave Randall's glare and used some of the sherry myself. If I must go to the gates of perdition with Cork, I, too, will not go in a Procrustean bed.

Later that night, when we were in our rooms, I suggested to Cork that we might convert some of his coin into Geddies silver.

"And what would we do with candlesticks, sir, or a salt cellar? It would be that much baggage. Besides, I would take advantage of a trust, for the Geddies Silver now on tables in this land will be worth a high price thirty or forty years from now."

I looked a bit puzzled, and he went on.

"It is in old Farley's instructions for using the process that you did not see. Since the patent runs out with the death of the fourth son, old Farley left clear wishes that the pages be burned, and the process destroyed forever."

"My Lord, how selfish!" I cried.

"How so? He made capital on his own idea and enriched others, as well. And now I am to bed, or half a bed. Perhaps we should invent a bed that expands and contracts to fit the user. It could be done with rollers."

There you are. Another idea for money-making that will go nowhere. Where Geddies kept his idea alive for four lifetimes, I knew that Cork would forget his by morning. I made note of it anyway. Could be, in his dotage, he will begin to see things my way.

*There's an old saying: Never play cards with a stranger—
especially for high stakes . . .*

HIGH STAKES

by EDWARD WELLEN

The only flush to come to Mark Benson was on his face when he looked at his cards and thought of Catherine. One by one the others threw in their hands. But Mark held on. His poker face grew ashen once his semimonthly take-home was no longer his to take home. But he held on. Randy Smith seemed willing enough to accept Mark's IOUs and Mark was desperate to win back something of what he had lost.

He grimaced as Smith continued to sweep in pot after sweet pot. Shuffling, cutting, dealing, Smith's fingers had an air of easy competence. Mark sat staring over his hopeless cards at the calm cold face of Smith. Draw or stud, deuces wild or high-low—it made no difference what they played. The man was too good. Even stolid Herb Winger bit hard on his pipestem.

Whose idea was it, anyway, to invite Smith to sit in? Oh, yes, Jim Poag, standing there rubbing his snub nose. Couldn't even call Smith an acquaintance of Poag's. Smith was some kind of salesman handling some line of buttons; he had called at Diamond Brothers, the suit-manufacturing firm that Poag worked for as a purchasing agent; they had somehow got to talking about cardplaying, Poag had mentioned the regular Thursday night game and that Bill Merrill, whose turn it was to play host, had come down with the flu. And first thing you knew, Jim Poag was phoning around saying his friend Randy Smith had invited them to meet at Smith's hotel suite. Smith was too damn lucky.

Mark tried bluffing. Smith didn't bluff. Mark thought of Catherine waiting at home and finger-combed his damp hair. This would really tear it between them. He scribbled another IOU. Hold on, that was the only thing to do. His luck would change. It was bound to. It couldn't be this bad and not turn into a run of good luck. Sooner or later it had to come. If he could only hang in.

Smith was trying to hide a yawn. No, you don't, Mark thought

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grimly. And Jim Poag, the one who had got Mark into this, was no help, sheepishly rolling down his sleeves, buttoning his shirt, tightening his tie, and shrugging into his jacket—all this business a broad hint that he had to be up early for the grind next day at Diamond Brothers.

Smith looked inquiringly at Mark over a mountain of winnings. The others looked unhappy. They knew Mark had nothing more to base his IOUs on. They wouldn't tell Smith that, but they looked glum.

Mark forced a smile. "One more hand."

Smith pursed his lips and nodded. He dealt.

Mark studied his two pair, aces and kings, and discarded a nine. Smith expressionlessly dealt him a useless ten. Mark did not look at the faces of the others as he raised and reraised. This was his last chance. He breathed a prayer as he laid down his two pair.

Smith gently laid down three deuces.

Mark made what he hoped was a gallantly nonchalant gesture. He jingled the few coins in his pocket and managed a laugh. "I can still scratch up carfare."

In relief the others got ready to go. Mark shook the last cigarette out of his pack, stuck it in his mouth, and lit it with hands that didn't seem too unsteady. They weren't going to see him panic.

He could crawl out from under the IOUs if it came to that: gambling debts, he was sure, weren't legal. But all Smith had to do was show Mark's boss the IOUs and Mark would be out a good job. Mark would also be out a good wife, coming home without his pay. Catherine had warned him enough.

He left with the others, even shook Smith's hand. They waited for the elevator in silence. He saw bitterly he needn't have been afraid that the sickliness he felt on his face would give him away. The others avoided meeting his eyes, as though looking at a loser was somehow contaminating. To hell with them and their damned sympathy!

They got down to the street and out into the chill air without the others seeming to notice his despair, though he thought the elevator operator kept staring at him. But that was only his own imagination.

Out in the darkness and the neon glare Mark and the others paused at the corner before they went their ways. Poag wore a

worried, almost furtive look that quickly turned stubbornly just—as though Mark's loss was after all strictly Mark's fault for hanging on hopelessly and trying to buck another man's incredible streak of luck.

Herb Winger started to speak. "Remember, next Thursday we meet at my—"

Mark pretended he didn't notice Jim Poag elbow Winger.

Winger waved goodbye to Mark with his pipestem and Poag rubbed his nose and mumbled something and both watched their chance to cross to the parking lot. Mark put up his coat collar and waited for the doorman's whistle to flag a taxi.

The doorman slammed the cab door and the taxi pulled away. The others were crossing on a long diagonal and the cab passed behind them. Mark heard them in an awed recap of the session. "No, it was luck—pure and simple luck." That was Poag. They looked around, saw Mark passing, and guiltily answered his wave.

The cab rounded the next corner. Mark leaned forward and told the driver, "Right again."

"You said—"

"I know. But I just remembered I left something valuable in the hotel. You can drop me at the side entrance."

The driver made the turn and pulled up at the side entrance.

"Should I wait?"

"What? No. No, thanks."

Mark got out, handed the driver a half dollar, and entered the hotel. He took the stairs. He had hardly rapped on Smith's door when it opened.

"Hi, honey—oh." Smith's smile faded to a frown.

It was too late for Smith to hold the door against him. Mark had already edged in.

"Look, Benson, you'll have to see me some other time. I'm expecting a friend any minute now. You understand."

The words rushed out. "Smith, I know you don't want to ruin me. And you will if you don't let me have my paycheck and the IOUs. My wife—after all, we were playing to have fun, weren't we?" he finished lamely.

Smith deepened his frown, clicked his tongue. Then his face softened and he seemed about to speak. But he checked himself and his face hardened. And when he spoke it was to say, in a tone of finality, "Sorry, Benson."

He put his hand on Mark's chest to back him out . . .

Mark came out of a blur of fury to find himself staring down at the body of Smith, and then at the heavy hotel ashtray in his own hand. There was a smear of blood on Smith's temple, another smear of blood on an edge of the ashtray.

He started when he heard high heels outside in the corridor heading this way and remembered Smith's "Hi, honey—" He took a step toward the half-open door, then stopped. It would look funny to shut the door in her face. But there was no time to think.

He grabbed hold of Smith's body and dragged it into the bathroom. Just made it. A light tap on the outer door and the high heels were in the suite.

He turned on the faucet, washed his hands, tried to think. He looked around the bathroom, hurrying his gaze past Smith's body. The woman would be getting impatient, perhaps suspicious. The only way to get out of here was to walk out the door.

Suppose he came out holding a towel in front of his face as though drying it. Go to meet the woman that way and then throw the towel over her face. She would have no look at him before he struck and then the towel could serve as both a blindfold and a gag. With the woman unconscious, he'd have time to wipe his prints from the ashtray, have time to return to Smith's body, grab the cash and the IOUs, and get out. The doorman and the cab driver might remember him, but once he got out of here he'd figure a way to alibi himself. It would seem a simple fatal hotel robbery.

He turned off the faucet and prepared to come out. He stepped into the doorway toeling his face. Then he heard the voice—and froze. He could not move.

"Hi, you old cardsharp! I waited till I was sure they'd all gone. Hurry up, you old black sheep, I want to be there waiting with my arms folded when my bad boy staggers home and tries to break the bad news. C'mon, Uncle Randy, hand me the winnings so I can show Mark what he was in for if you'd been playing for keeps."

a **NEW Loren Mensing** story by

FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

Like so many other detectives in fiction (if not all), Loren Mensing can't go anywhere without bumping into crime and mystery—it goes with the territory. Here he is in New York City, attending an annual meeting of a law professors' organization, when he becomes involved in the Kumquats Case, a neatly dovetailed puzzler that plays fair with the reader: all the clues are deftly planted—if you can spot them. . .

THE KUMQUATS AFFAIR

by **FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.**

The first and last time Loren Mensing saw the man with the boil on his nose was when Loren stepped out of the self-service elevator on the eighth floor and boil-nose stepped in. Loren had come to New York City for the annual meeting of a law professors' organization, but in midafternoon he'd slipped out of the convention hotel, subways downtown, and trudged through slush-blanketed streets to the old twelve-story office building on Park and Nineteenth. As the elevator door whispered open and Loren emerged, boil-nose elbowed past him into the empty cage and the door slid shut.

"New York manners," Loren muttered, and walked down the hallway to a fumed-oak door that read **TOMMY HAGEN ENTERPRISES, INC.** and beneath that legend the single word **ENTER**. A huge movie poster of the quintessential Tommy dominated each wall of the foyer: the ageless face atop the reed-thin body, the eyes that seemed to stare at something no one else could see, the fingers of both hands intertwined like pretzels in the famous Hagen gesture.

A flame-haired receptionist polished her nails at a blondwood desk, and a few feet to her left a circular staircase with wrought-iron railings wound upward to the next floor. The receptionist

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took Loren's name and spoke it into the communicator. Within seconds Joyce Brook burst into the foyer with arms outspread in delight and enveloped him in a vigorous hug.

"God, Loren, it's been a hundred *years* since you've been in town! Come on, let me show you my domain. I was just about to call a meeting with my people but—wait, damn it, I will have that meeting, Loren, and I want you in it too!"

She turned to the fiery-haired receptionist. "Donna, buzz Beau and Andy and Kathy. Powwow in my office in five minutes. Come on, Loren." She scooped him up by the arm and gave him a breathless guided tour while propelling him along an inner corridor.

"That's Beau's office, Beau Douglas, he takes care of theatrical and TV revivals of Tommy's movies, and this one belongs to Kathy Ellison, she's my assistant manager you'll like her, and Andy, that's Andy Lauer, he's in charge of licensing Tommy's image on everything from T-shirts to cereal. Andy's office is up at the top of that spiral staircase, you see there used to be a law firm here and they had their library upstairs—and here we are!"

She pointed Loren to a shiny black leather armchair in her own corner office and seated herself behind the double-sized mahogany desk.

Loren and Joyce had met in college fifteen years ago. With her six-foot height and air of aggressive competence and ambition, she had not been attractive to many men, but she and Loren had seen something in each other, although after graduation they'd drifted apart.

"And you're in charge of the whole East Coast operation, marketing Tommy's old movies and his image. Tremendous." Loren folded his heavy overcoat across the arm of his chair. "Lot of money in it?"

"Bundles! You know, he's been dead twenty years now and everyone still goes ape over him. W.C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, and Tommy Hagen. There are all sorts of books about him, people watch his movies over and over, you can use the image to sell anything. They're marketing a Tommy Hagen peanut butter in the spring. There's only one thing wrong." Her room-filling voice dropped to almost a whisper. "And that's why I'm so glad you dropped by. Loren, someone's trying to sabotage Tommy Hagen Enterprises." She bit down hard on her lower lip. "And it's getting scary."

"Tell me," Loren said simply.

She hunched forward, nesting her chin in her fists. "About a month ago little things began going wrong around the office. Files misplaced. Business appointments being canceled over the phone and then later we found out it was an impostor who called and the appointment hadn't been canceled at all. That kind of thing. Then it got nastier."

"What happened?"

She drew back the handle of the upper right drawer of her desk. "A week ago Tuesday I came to work as usual and opened this drawer to get something, and there were a couple of dozen big fat worms crawling over my stationery. Somebody had broken into the office and put them in the desk during the night."

"Literally broken in?" Loren asked. "Did he leave traces? I assume you called the police."

"No, I didn't bother, and there weren't any traces. This is an old building and you can get into any office by using a credit card on the lock. We're tied into an electronic security system now and that kind of thing can't happen here again. But as if all this wasn't enough harassment, now I've got a new kind of mess on my hands. A legal mess."

Before Loren could ask for details there was a knock on the door and he rose as two men and a woman filed in and Joyce introduced him to her associates. Beauregard Douglas was a dapper bantamweight in his early thirties, elegantly attired, with dark hair cut short enough to please a drill sergeant. Tall gawky Andy Lauer had a high forehead, a habit of slouching against walls, and a preference for knit sweaters rather than suit jackets. Kathy Ellison—short, delightfully plump, blonde and cuddly-looking—contrasted startlingly with Joyce, causing Loren to wonder if that was why she'd been hired as Joyce's assistance manager.

When they were settled Joyce popped a cigarette between her lips without lighting it. "As it happens, gang, Loren is a law professor and can probably explain the mess we're in better than I can. Loren, tell us about Section 24 of the Copyright Act."

Loren had taught a copyright class two semesters ago and had an excellent memory. "Well, I'm oversimplifying more than I would in school, but a copyright runs for twenty-eight years and then is renewable for another twenty-eight. The two periods are completely separate entities. If I copyright a story, say, and then I die before the renewal period, Section 24 determines who takes

the renewal interest. The author's surviving spouse and children have the highest priority."

"All right, now here's a movie trivia question for you. Who is Obed Middleton?"

Loren shook his head in perplexity. "Never heard of him."

Joyce nodded at Kathy Ellison and her assistant answered the question in a voice as melodious as Chinese wind bells. "Obed Middleton was a hog raiser in Enid, Oklahoma. Around 1930 he had a short story published in a pulp magazine. One of Tommy Hagen's producers happened to read the story and the studio paid three hundred dollars for the movie rights. Then Tommy and the writers twisted the story around and turned it into *Kumquats*."

"God, what a memory!" Beau Douglas said beneath his breath, and looked at Kathy as if she were a witch. Her performance had given Loren a clearer insight into why she was the assistant manager, but the exact nature of the legal problem still eluded him. He'd seen *Kumquats* a dozen times and knew that it was Tommy Hagen's most famous movie, a permanent comedy classic like the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* or Fields' *It's a Gift*.

"Now Tommy had foresight," Joyce picked up the thread of the story. "He bought up his pictures from the studio in the late forties, just before the big TV boom. Then he died in 1955 and his will left everything to the boy he'd adopted. The lawyers set up Tommy Hagen Enterprises, and since then Keith, the son, has made a mint out of licensing Tommy's image on products and renting the movies to TV stations. Until now, that is."

"But where does Section 24—" Loren squeezed his eyes shut in concentration. "Wait a minute, I think I see."

"Obed Middleton died in 1950," Joyce said. "In 1958 the renewal came due on his story and the widow renewed the copyright, just for sentimental reasons I guess. Then a few months ago a chiseler named Orval Cupples went to the nursing home in Tulsa where the old woman is dying by inches and paid her two hundred dollars for the movie rights in that story during the renewal period."

"But the author, Obed Middleton, had died before the renewal period began," Loren pointed out. "So the law treats the renewal period as a separate entity, and the deal Obed made with Tommy Hagen's studio should have been renegotiated with the widow a long time ago."

Andy Lauer jerked erect from his slouch as if an alarm had

gone off in his ear. "You mean to say Tommy Hagen Enterprises never bothered to do that before it licensed all those hundreds of showings of *Kumquats* on TV? And all those showings were infringements of her copyright?"

"And now the widow's rights belong to this Cupples," Loren reminded him.

"I had an appointment with Cupples right here an hour ago," Joyce continued, her tone hinting that she hadn't enjoyed the experience. "Ratty-looking type with an ugly boil on his nose." *Mr. New York Manners*, Loren recalled. "He wants \$100,000 plus a cut of all income from future showings of the picture. Otherwise he'll sue us for all those infringements and keep us from ever renting the picture again. And damn it, we'll probably have to pay. *Kumquats* is the keystone of the Hagen movies. We can't rent a block of them to a TV station without that one."

"It would be like an Orson Welles retrospective without *Citizen Kane*," Kathy Ellison volunteered brightly.

"What are you going to do about Cupples?" Beau Douglas demanded.

Joyce answered him without hesitation. "Call Sheldon Rogers, the copyright lawyer, and make an appointment for tomorrow if I can. Then I have to call Keith in L.A. and fill him in." She pointed her unlit cigarette in Loren's direction. "How about coming with me tomorrow?"

Loren pulled a dog-eared convention schedule from his breast pocket. "Nothing exciting tomorrow. Sure, count me in."

On the street, while he was waving for a cab to take him back to the convention hotel, a thought occurred to him. He shoved open the half-rusted door of an empty phone booth and swung up the directory on its dirty chain. The white pages listed CUPPLES ORVAL TALENT AGENCY with an address in the mid-Forties and a phone number. There was no other listing for that name in the Manhattan directory, which meant either that Cupples lived elsewhere or had an unlisted home phone.

In his hotel room after dinner he called an old acquaintance who had been a fixture in the New York entertainment world for decades. "Yeah, I know who he is. Small-time grifter, calls himself a talent agent, makes his bread booking over-the-hill strip-pers into cheap clubs in Jersey and Pennsylvania. Why you want to know?"

Loren answered the question with another. "Was he ever a lawyer? Disbarred maybe?"

"No way," his informant said. "I doubt if he ever got through high school."

"Does he have any close associates who are entertainment lawyers?"

"Negative. In fact, the guy doesn't have close associates, period. Or distant associates. He's a real loner and as devious as they come. If you're in a deal with him, my advice is to get out."

Loren expressed thanks and hung up. The longer he thought about what he had learned, the more his puzzlement grew.

"... And so the descendants of the person whose story was the basis of a film have the power to tie up the film fifty years after it was made. Congress didn't realize that would be the result when it passed the Copyright Act in 1909, but the courts have construed Section 24 in that manner. Just recently the city's educational television station lost a similar infringement suit over an old Rudolph Valentino film."

Sheldon Rogers, Esq.—tall, graying, velvet-voiced, his every word and movement a study in cool deliberation—drew a long cigar from its pale-tan tube and touched flame to the tip, puffing deeply as if to refresh himself after his discourse on copyright. Loren looked down at the discarded tube on the lawyer's desk blotter and read the brand name Montecruz. He'd heard connoisseurs call it the finest cigar in the world.

"It's a shame Pop didn't know about Section 24 when he bought his old pictures from the studio. He could have paid off Mrs. Middleton himself." Beneath the deep California tan there was a ruthless look to Keith Hagen that suggested more loudly than words that whoever stood in his way ran a heavy risk.

Loren had taken an instant dislike to Tommy Hagen's adopted son from the moment they had met this morning in Rogers' anteroom. Keith had arrived on the night flight from Los Angeles, but he looked no less dangerous for lack of sleep.

"Good old klutzy Pop, going into hock to buy up his pictures because he was sure they'd make a mint someday, and then he blows the legal red tape."

With every word Keith spoke, Loren felt increasing delight at the fact that Orval Cupples was tying up the young man's income from his father's masterpiece. Beside Loren on the richly up-

holstered couch, Joyce Brook chewed her lower lip.

Sheldon Rogers broke the uncomfortable silence. "I take it, Mr. Hagen, that you want me to negotiate with Cupples and persuade him to reduce his price to what I would consider his rock-bottom figure, and then close with him?"

"Right now." Keith snapped out the words savagely.

"Let me try his office." The copyright attorney pressed a button on his phone and instructed an unseen secretary to put through the call for him. When his instrument buzzed he lifted it delicately to his ear. "Good morning, may I speak to Mr. Cupples please... Sheldon Rogers, I'm an attorney representing Tommy Hagen Enterprises... He *what*? My God... No, just a business matter."

The lawyer dropped his phone into its plastic nest as if it were white-hot and gazed bleakly at his three visitors. "That was a police officer. Orval Cupples was found dead by his secretary when she came to work this morning. Murdered. They're going to want to know what my business with him was."

"That's privileged. You tell them nothing." Beneath his tan Keith Hagen had turned fishbelly-white.

"You forget," Loren pointed out with a certain perverse satisfaction, "that Mr. Rogers gave the name of Tommy Hagen Enterprises over the phone just now. They don't need him or his privileged information. They can go straight to you and Joyce, and when they do they're going to find out that you had one hundred thousand reasons to kill Cupples. What time did your plane get in this morning?"

"Landed at JFK about 2:45 A.M.," Keith snarled. "Why?"

"You'd better pray Cupples died before then," Loren told him.

They cabbed downtown in chilly silence and trooped into the lobby of the office building on Park and Nineteenth just as an elevator door slid shut and the indicator began to ascend. "Damn new elevators," Joyce remarked. "They're built so they have to go all the way to the top before they come down again." She stamped her feet impatiently in the underheated lobby and the three of them watched the indicator rise to twelve, then crawl downward.

As soon as the cage reached ground level they piled in and Loren punched the button for the eighth floor. They marched into the Hagen Enterprises suite just as a bulky lizard-skinned man in a shapeless gray suit with a topcoat slung over his arm was com-

ing down the spiral staircase. When he saw the newcomers enter he took the last steps two at a time and blocked their path, flipping open a worn leather case.

"Lieutenant Genetelli, Homicide. I've been waiting for you to get back. Are you Joyce Brook?"

Whatever Joyce was about to say caught in her throat and she nodded, her face muscles tense.

"I've been upstairs questioning Lauer, your products man. You were at this lawyer Rogers' office when Rogers called Orval Cupples for an appointment, weren't you?"

"We all were," Loren replied for her. He introduced himself and Keith Hagen followed suit, and the four strode down the inner corridor to Joyce's office.

"I came down from Cupples' shop to find out what I could about Tommy Hagen Enterprises." The lieutenant draped his overcoat across his lap as he sank into a chair. "We found some memoranda about this place in Cupples' private papers. Looks as if he'd bought up some rights you needed and was holding you up for a bunch of money, huh?"

"If you know so much you don't need to ask," Keith snapped.

"Now wait a minute." Loren stepped into the breach. "Maybe we can help more if you'll tell us a bit more. Could you at least let us know when and how Cupples was killed?"

Genetelli rubbed the stubble on his pouchy cheeks. "I don't suppose that's a secret. The medical examiner says he died between 7:00 and 8:00 A.M. His secretary found him on the floor when she got to work at 8:15. His skull was fractured with a big hunk of rock he kept on his office wall. Hawaiian fertility symbol. Looks like a stone rolling pin to me. His memo pad says he had an appointment at 7:30 this morning with a T.H."

"Tommy Hagen!" Joyce gave a little gasp of amazement.

"Pop's been dead for twenty years," Keith grated. "You think he came back from the grave to protect the rights to this movie?"

An almost forgotten scrap of trivia ascended to Loren's consciousness. Hadn't the great comic's full name been Thomas Keith Hagen? Yes, he was sure it had. Then wasn't it quite likely that Tommy had given his own name to his adopted son? If Keith's full name was Thomas Keith Hagen, Jr., then his initials would match those on the memo pad in Cupples' office.

And since Keith's plane had landed at Kennedy Airport more than four hours before the murder, the young hothead had had

plenty of opportunity to kill Cupples. Of course the initials on the memo pad could refer to Tommy Hagen Enterprises rather than to any person; or they might mean someone or something unconnected with the Hagen affairs. But at the moment Keith was clearly the prime suspect, and Loren wondered how long it would take Genetelli to recognize that fact.

After fifteen minutes of asking questions and scribbling in a pocket notebook, the lieutenant allowed himself a frosty little smile as the pattern took shape. Another ten minutes and he snapped the notebook shut, thanked the three of them, and left.

As soon as Genetelli was out of the office Keith Hagen sprang to his feet and began to pace the shag carpet uncontrollably. "My God!" he shouted. "The fool thinks I did it!" His voice was a mixture of fury and fear.

Joyce Brook clutched Loren's arm in a grip of desperation. "What's going to happen now?"

"Nothing, for a while," he said. "They don't have enough of a case yet. They'll question all the employees and guests at your hotel, Mr. Hagen, trying to find someone who may have seen you slip out this morning in time to keep a certain 7:30 appointment. They'll check your home phone in L.A., the pay phone at the airport, the phones in your hotel, trying to prove you placed a call to Cupples and made that appointment. If they prove it, you're up to your neck. Did you kill him?"

"No, no, no! I swear I never laid eyes on the man. You're a lawyer, Mensing, you're supposed to be some kind of detective, help me for God's sake, will you?"

Loren turned back to Joyce and without saying anything she nodded. The look of concern on her face was one that Loren knew from years past. Whenever she saw anyone in trouble, no matter how richly deserved the trouble might be, her instinct was to do something about it.

"All right," he said. "Spring semester doesn't begin for ten days. I'll gamble with you. You'll pay my expenses, and you'll write a \$5,000 check to the City University Law School Student Aid Fund. Win, lose, or draw, you write those checks. And if I find you're lying to me, Hagen, I go to Genetelli and give him everything I learn. Remember, I'm not your lawyer, I'm not even licensed to practice law in New York, and nothing you tell me is privileged. Now the first thing you do is call Sheldon Rogers back and retain him to take care of your Section 24 problem."

"But doesn't Cupples' murder take care of that?" Joyce wondered.

"Not in the least. The rights he bought from Mrs. Middleton are now part of his estate. Cupples' will governs who takes the rights after his death, or the intestacy law if he didn't leave a will. Rogers will have to find out who the legatees are and strike a deal with them. Probably the surrogate's court will have to approve the deal as long as the estate is in probate. Another thing, get Rogers to hire an Oklahoma detective who can look into Mrs. Middleton's assignment of rights to Cupples. Maybe he can find some legal grounds for overturning the deal in court. Meanwhile I'm going to investigate a few angles here."

"Loren," Joyce said, "you're not licensed as a private detective. Can't you get in hot water for—"

He patted her hand. "Not the way I'm going to do it."

That afternoon he made a long-distance call to his home city. Bubbly-voiced Marcus Jaan Hooft, head of The Hooft Agency which occasionally did investigative work for him, gave Loren the name of a reliable New York detective.

At ten the next morning, the last day of the year, Loren climbed three flights of stairs in a shabby office building near Columbus Circle and knocked on the pebbled-glass door of *Madison Investigations*. Moses Madison was a small dandyish black man who kept three phones half buried in the clutter of papers on his ancient desk. From the calls that punctuated their discussion Loren gathered that most of Madison's investigative work was on contract to the city's legal-aid and public-defender offices. He seemed to delight in role-playing, talking like a Bedford-Stuyvesant street dude one minute and like a Rhodes scholar the next.

"Your theory is based on an assumption," he pointed out to Loren. "Namely, that Cupples' murder is connected with the petty sabotage at Tommy Hagen Enterprises."

Loren shifted in his uncomfortable wooden chair. "With your help I hope to prove that assumption. That's why I want your operatives to comb every place in the metropolitan area that sells live worms. Let's see if we can't establish a sale to one of our suspects."

Madison ticked off their names on callused fingers. "Beau Douglas, Andy Lauer, Kathy Ellison. And you want a background re-

port on each of them plus twenty-four-hour surveillance. It's going to cost you, Professor. But I know Tommy Hagen's son can pay my price." The detective crossed one purple-trousered ankle over the other on the edge of the venerable desk. "I still think you should add that receptionist to the list, Donna whatever her name is."

"Not necessary." Loren shook his head. "She's brand-new at the office and wasn't working there when the trouble started, and the girl whose place she took left to get married and is now living in Denver, so she's out of it too."

"But of course you do want reports on anyone who seems to have a close association with any of the three suspects?"

"With one exception," Loren said. "Me. I'm going to be cultivating them myself over the next few days."

Madison's lips split in raucous laughter and he slapped his palms together. "Why, man, you don't think I'd bill you for a report on *you*!"

"The thought never sullied my mind," Loren said innocently.

The private detective's response was a mild obscenity, and they grinned at each other in mutual understanding.

"Hey, Prof," Madison asked as Loren was leaving, "you want a signal to call off my shadow in case you get lucky, uh, cultivating the Ellison chick?"

Loren spent New Year's Eve with Joyce Brook in her homey-cluttered apartment in an East Village highrise. They sipped eggnog spiked with chocolate liqueur and called back memories of old times and old loves as if that could exorcise the unacknowledged loneliness that each of them sensed in the other.

Late in the afternoon of the first day of 1975 Loren took a cab through empty slushy streets to the precinct station. For Lieutenant Genetelli this was not a holiday. Sitting in a scarred chair next to the lieutenant's gunmetal-gray desk, Loren summarized his work as deputy legal adviser and occasional detective without portfolio for his home city's police department. He was careful not to mention that at the moment he was more or less working for Genetelli's prime suspect in the Cupples murder. After a few long-distance phone calls the lieutenant was impressed enough to give Loren a status report on the case.

"We can't prove the contact," he growled. "Joyce Brook called Keith Hagen the afternoon before the killing, 3:23 P.M. New York

time. That was the first Keith had ever heard of Orval Cupples. If he called Cupples to make that date for 7:30 the next morning, it had to be after 12:23 P.M. Pacific time and it had to be a long-distance call. Cupples' secretary swears the office got no long-distance calls at all that afternoon, at least not before five o'clock when she went home. Cupples stayed late. We know he got the call making the appointment while he was in the office because he made that note on the office memo pad, but so far we can't connect the call to Hagen."

"Any luck finding a witness who saw him leave his hotel around seven the morning of the murder?"

"Not yet," Genetelli grunted. "But we'll find one."

Loren said nothing that might suggest the existence of other suspects. The time for that, he thought, would come later.

Loren's headquarters the next day was Tommy Hagen Enterprises. He spent the morning in Andy Lauer's office at the top of the spiral stairs, belaboring the tall gawky products expert's patience with endless questions about the business of marketing Tommy's image. When Lauer seemed on the point of losing his temper, Loren reminded him that he was merely trying to save Lauer's employer from a murder charge. At twelve sharp, having learned nothing of value, he left by the ninth-floor exit door that served Lauer's office and went out for a coffee-shop lunch.

His target for the early afternoon was Beau Douglas. Making himself at home in Douglas' office along the eighth-floor inner hallway, Loren studied the form contracts that licensed theaters and film societies and television stations to exhibit Tommy Hagen movies, and asked several technical questions about the interpretation of certain clauses which the pedantic little Southerner was unable to answer.

At four o'clock he gave up to allow himself time for Kathy Ellison, who looked cool and tempting in a pink pants suit. In the hour before closing Loren learned that she had been working at Tommy Hagen Enterprises for eight months, that Joyce personally had hired her as assistant manager, and that both Lauer and Douglas had resented not having been promoted to the higher-paying position themselves.

At five Loren invited Kathy to join him for a cocktail and they sipped Scotch sour in a dimly lit lounge on Sixteenth; but after one drink Kathy excused herself—"Dinner date tonight," she

smiled—and slid from the red leather booth. As she left the lounge a middle-aged man in a rumpled gray mackinaw took a last gulp of beer, set his stein on the bar, and headed for the door in her wake as if he'd forgotten an urgent appointment.

Late the next day Loren returned to Columbus Circle and the cluttered office of Moses Madison. The black detective picked out three manila folders from the debris of his desk top and handed them to Loren. A fourth folder he slid neatly between his vest and jacket.

"They ain't as much detail as they should be, but you know how it is, I got a license to keep and Equal Opportunity cats I got to stroke, so I have to hire a certain number of incompetent white help." Madison grinned with infinite self-delight as Loren dropped into a hard chair and skimmed the files.

Subject: Beauregard Douglas. Georgia born and bred, served two tours with the Marines in Vietnam, lived in a converted brownstone in the Bronx, used hashish on occasion.

Subject: Andrew Lauer. Master's degree in marketing, a girl friend in her third year at N.Y.U. Law School and another who worked in a Greek bellydance joint, expensive tastes in consumer goods and a habit of living beyond his means.

Subject: Kathleen Ellison. Presently having an affair with a married stockbroker, reputation for displaying a violent temper when she'd drunk too much.

In ten minutes of speed reading Loren absorbed enough information about three people's private lives to make him thoroughly disgusted with himself. On the other hand, these reports all but clinched the case, and that, he tried to convince himself, was what counted.

"You finished?" Moses Madison asked. When Loren nodded, the private detective removed the fourth folder from beneath his jacket and waved it tantalizingly just out of Loren's reach.

"This is a report one of my men give me after he paid a visit to Chester's Bait and Tackle in Boonton, New Jersey. You want to try and dee-duce which one of them bought the worms?"

A grin spread slowly across Loren's face. He took off his glasses, polished them on his coatsleeve, and screwed up his features as if in agony of cerebration. Then he pronounced one of the three names and nonchalantly adjusted his glasses on his nose again.

Madison slapped his palms together in appreciation. "Good

shot!" he chuckled. "Give the professor a see-gar."

"Make it a Montecruz," Loren said as he reached for the fourth folder.

That evening he paid a return visit to Genetelli's cubicle at the police station. After talking for more than an hour he finally persuaded the dubious lieutenant to do two things: Genetelli agreed to have the suspect's neighborhood canvassed in search of someone who might have seen the suspect leave early the morning of the murder, and to have a fingerprint man dust the suspect's office at Tommy Hagen Enterprises in search of the prints of Orval Cupples.

By noon the next day both a witness and the prints had been found, and the arrest had been made.

Joyce Brook crushed another barely smoked cigarette into the overflowing tray on her desk. Loren saw that behind her quiet rage she was close to tears. He doubted that she was following his explanation. The truth had hit her too hard.

"My assumption was that the acts of sabotage here were connected with the murder. The 'T.H.' memo on Cupples' desk pad pointed in that direction, of course, but we couldn't consider it absolute proof.

"As you described the sabotage to me, it included things like the deliberate misplacing of files and the cancellation of important appointments with fake phone calls. That kind of dirty trick suggested a trickster who had detailed knowledge of your operations and access to your office. In short, *a trickster who worked here.*

"And then Orval Cupples enters the picture, a cheap talent agent with no legal background and no lawyer associates, who just happened to have grasped a subtle point about Section 24 of the Copyright Act and bought the rights which tied up the most valuable Tommy Hagen movie. Assuming that he was working as an agent for our trickster, where did he get his legal knowledge? Answer: in one way or another, from the trickster.

"So our trickster works here, and knows a lot of law or has access to such knowledge. Was it Beau Douglas? Kathy Ellison? Andy Lauer? None of them is a lawyer.

"Almost from the start I had a clue as to which of them it was. Not mathematical proof, but a clue. On my first visit here, when I got out of the elevator at the eighth floor, it happened that Cup-

ples was just leaving after making his demands on you, and bumped into me as he got into the cage I'd just left. Now I didn't realize this until you mentioned it later, but the self-service elevators in this building are a lot newer than the building itself. They're the type that have to go all the way to the top floor before they can come down again.

"What does that mean? It means that when Cupples stepped into that car, he wasn't going down. *He was going up.*

"Does any of our suspects work above the eighth floor of this building? Yes, just one. Andy Lauer, whose office has its own private entrance and exit onto the ninth-floor hallway, which I used when I went out to lunch two days ago. In addition, he has a girl friend in law school, and she happens to have taken a copyright course last spring, as I verified this morning. And, as Madison's report proves, it was Lauer who bought the worms that were dumped into your desk.

"After meeting with you, Cupples must have gone upstairs to report to Lauer. I think he must also have demanded a lot more money than Lauer was paying him to act as front man. Later in the afternoon Lauer called Cupples' office and made that appointment for 7:30 the next morning. They had a fight over the division of the money you were going to pay Cupples, and Lauer killed him. Lauer was living way over his income and needed every cent for himself."

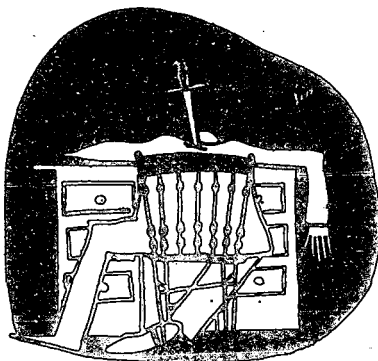
"He didn't do all this just for the money," Joyce said. She seemed calmer now but Loren was afraid it might be the calm before an explosion, because her remark told him that she knew what lay behind the sabotage.

"No, not just for the money," he said, choosing his words judiciously. "He was angry when you—well, when you hired a woman as assistant manager instead of promoting him. I think he hoped to make such a mess here that you'd either quit or be fired. He figured Keith would give him your job, and he also saw the chance to make a nice piece of change on the side out of the Cupples deal. Now he's under arrest, Keith's off the hook on the murder charge, Sheldon Rogers thinks he can prove Cupples made misrepresentations to Mrs. Middleton which will get her assignment to him invalidated in court, and you won't find any more worms crawling over your letterheads." He couldn't look directly into the moistness of her eyes. "Happy endings all around, right? So why are you so glum?"

"Damn all men to hell!" she burst out. "All of them!" And she buried her face in her hands and wept.

When she spoke again it was without raising her eyes to him. "Could you—just do me a favor and let me alone for a while, will you, Loren?"

Loren wanted desperately to say the right words to her but he knew that there were no right words to say. "Sure," he muttered. "See you next time I'm in town." He let himself silently out of the office and took the elevator down eight flights to the slushy street and cabbed back to his hotel to pack his bags and get out of New York. In a week or so, he thought, he'd give her a call.



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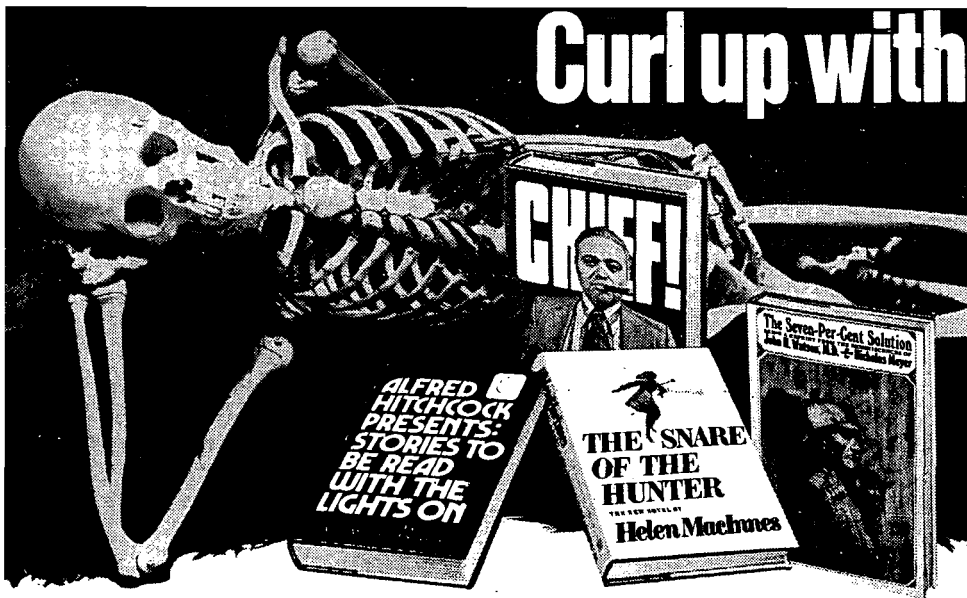
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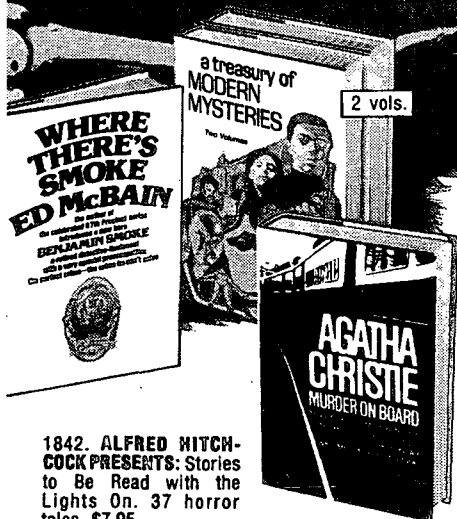
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a NEW crime story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

The client, a man of many names, had to get rid of someone, had to "top-a bloke." It was the kind of job the client could not do himself—not with safety. So the client went to the Expert, a specialist in arranging to have someone chopped, zapped...

HOW TO TOP A BLOKE

by JEFFRY SCOTT

The Expert waited in the latest of a long series of rented workshops.

He had operated alone, ever since technical college, and tended to talk to himself. He had a rough idea of what his new client wanted and was considering possible methods.

"Petrol," said the Expert. "Beautiful." Then he fell silent, scratching the side of his nose with a bit of wire.

His place of business could have been called cosy. An outer room was filled with the guts and carcasses of perhaps fifty household appliances—elderly automatic tea-makers sitting on top of eyeless TV sets filled with cardboard boxes of three-pin plugs and odd fuses. Vacuum-cleaner hoses spilled from a 1958 washing machine, like entrails.

It was tidier in the closet behind the fireproof door. There, carboys and old 12-volt battery cases were ranged on shelves, facing ranks of plastic food boxes, none of them labeled plainly but all bearing symbol-codes devised by the Expert.

"Petrol," he repeated, as the client's car drew up.

The workshop itself was littered with circuit diagrams and hobby magazines, and filled with the clean reek of chemicals. The Expert liked the smell and the disorder.

When it came time for him to earn money, he would act the neurotic housewife, clearing up and throwing away until the in-

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ner room was as free of nonfunctional items as an operating theater in a hospital.

Prudent men recognize when sentiment must surrender to survival. The Expert was prudent as a rat in a mousetrap factory. Not a nice man, the Expert, but clever in his way.

Now, with the client coming in, he was not working but preparing to negotiate, and show off a little. He felt almost at ease, totally in control, and slightly patronizing.

"Ah," said the client, trying to smile. "Santa Claus's workshop, eh? Where the toys come from."

The Expert looked down his nose. He was wearing platform, patchwork boots in three primary colors, flared jeans, and a ribbed black-cotton sweater under a blue shirt with its sleeves rolled up. A silver-star beauty mark was glued to his hollow cheek. Yet, like all artificers, anything he wore had the air of being working clothes.

His client was a big man who had once been gross. Abrupt loss of weight had left his expensive suit looking secondhand. The client had a reassuringly weak face, a square jaw contradicted by wide blue eyes, as if an illustrator of harmless fairy tales had made an unsatisfactory attempt to draw a military man.

Expert and client knew each other by sight and reputation. This allowed them to settle unspoken areas of mutual wariness while avoiding the suspicion which would have made a meeting impossible. Criminals do tend to know, or know of, other criminals; and that was what they were. In their own ways.

The client, Gilchrist by name, was now calling himself Major Bradford. "Well," he said, "I expect you can fix me up."

"I expect," the Expert agreed sardonically. "I thought you was a con merchant, Major. None of your actual violence. Very heavy scene, my scene." He drew a finger across his throat.

Gilchrist-Bradford blushed rather charmingly. It had made him a great deal of money from time to time. "We all change. Life is an endless succession of compromises."

Technical jargon apart, long words made the Expert feel out of his depth. "I wouldn't know," he responded.

His client put a bulky envelope on the workbench. "Mark of good faith. The ready, in cash, old chap."

The Expert did not touch the envelope. Gilchrist-Bradford was no fool. "You don't like it. What's the matter?"

The Expert was startled. "I wouldn't say that." He brooded for a

little. "You're offering too much, squire. Hell, you could go down Upton Park and get some herb to top a bloke for you for fifty quid—and no danger. Fifty? There's blokes who'll do it for twenty-five. Give 'em fifty, they'll chop the mark's head off and serve it up with an apple in his gob."

He leaned forward, diagrams crackling under his elbows. "I could take you down streets where they'll chop your ears off just for looking at 'em funny. You know that, well as I do. I mean, I gen'ly work for businesses, know what I mean?" He mimed a handshake. "*'Congratulations on the fire, Tom. When you having yours, boy?'*"

Gilchrist-Bradford cleared his throat. "I could hire somebody, I suppose. To do it." The faded eyes were apologetic. "But in my experience, from what I've heard—well, it's not very satisfactory. There tend to be, um, repercussions. Somebody talks. Or your chappie from Upton Park blues his fifty pounds and then comes back for more. Blackmail, eh? Or just pressure. As you say, these are people who enjoy hurting—well, other people. I'm not exactly unknown, in the trade as it were. I couldn't hide and I'm far too old to run."

Thinking it over, the Expert nodded slowly. In fact, he just wanted to make the client sweat. He had seen Gilchrist-Bradford, in the distance, up West. Strolling into clubs and bars with that subtle air of right. The Expert loathed toffee-noses and guvners.

"Fair enough," he granted.

"But is it?" The client seemed to be talking to himself. "Have you ever, um, arranged anything like this before?"

"Do me favors! We don't talk about that. Should know better at your age." The Expert's contempt was as genuine and swift as if his client had spat on the altar in a cathedral. He calmed a little. "I know what's what, squire."

"I'm sorry." Gilchrist-Bradford watched the envelope being put away in a workbench drawer. "I never doubted, it was silly of me. That department store by the Common last winter. It went up like a bomb." His voice creaked. He was awed at the memory. "Exactly like a bomb."

The Expert pulled at his lower lip. Something ranker and sweeter threaded through the stink of chemicals. Both men were perspiring now. "Wojew say?"

Gilchrist-Bradford blinked at him. "That big store last winter. Everybody says—the talk is it had your trademark. No offense."

"Slow gas leak and a short-circuit spark," said the Expert crisply. Yet his eyes sparkled and he could not help expanding. "They never found the cause of that fire. Put it down to gas in the end, they did. Read what they said at the inquest. Not down to me, chum, no way."

After a moment, shockingly, he winked.

"Funny thing, the bloke who stood to make money from that fire, the bloke as owned the place, he had a heart attack the same night. Snuffed it while the ashes were still hot, like. It's all down to laughs and giggles, this life."

The client wiped his forehead. "Let's get on, then. Somebody, um, I don't know how to put it—"

"You want somebody chopped. Zapped, like they say in Yankee-land." The Expert spoke with gusto. Without getting up from his swivel stool, he began preparing instant coffee, talking as he worked.

"Petrol? Ever thought about petrol? Know the explosive potential of a gallon of it? Equal to fourteen sticks of dynamite. I mean, just one gallon! Fantastic."

"I'm not with you, old chap."

The Expert smirked. "Well, it means every time you get in your car you're riding around on a bomb. Know what I mean?"

Gilchrist-Bradford sighed and closed his eyes. "I'm not technically minded. Sorry."

"You don't need to be. Sugar?"

"Thank you, that'll do as it is." The client took a token sip.

The Expert emptied his mug. "Tin throat, me. Thass better. Where were we? Petrol. Don't go away."

Returning from the outer room, he put a chrome disc on the workbench. Projecting from one side was a cluster of plastic tubes, the ends plugged with wax, and either empty or filled with a colorless liquid.

"Filler cap for the petrol tank," the Expert explained. "I dreamed this up a couple of years back. Couldn't sleep, see. Those university shows on the box, they put 'em on before breakfast sometimes. I come downstairs, dead bored, been tossing and turning all night. Switch on and there's this chemistry lecture. Right interesting, it was. This come to me in a flash about an hour afterwards. Funny thing, inspiration."

"Yes."

"Coffee all right, want some more sugar or summing?"

"No, please. Tell me."

The Expert paused. "Listen, this bloke you want to top. Does his motor have a petrol cap like this or is it the sort with a lockable flap?"

"I don't know."

"You'd better find out, squire. See, this is a standard filler cap, fits most cars. Newer ones, they've got a lockable flap and a plainer cap underneath. Just a plain pressing—screws off when you get the flap up. Then again, since the old energy crisis, some fellers have bought those blockable caps."

"Not to worry. It's got to be one of three basic types. You find out which it is, I'll make you up a dupe and a key to get the other one open."

Exasperated at lack of response, the Expert spun the filler cap on the bench. The plastic tubes made a whispering noise as minute bubbles appeared in them.

"Ballpoint refills," the Expert told his visitor. "They'll shrivel to nothing in the heat. Or get blown clear in bits. Either way, they'll be overlooked if anyone goes checking the debris. End up as little lumps of plastic, most like, or smears of soot."

Gilchrist-Bradford was plaintive. "I'm afraid I don't follow."

"Look, squire, these refill tubes are full of—" The Expert became sarcastic. "Let's say a magic mixture to you. Nothing you can't buy over the counter or get in a chemistry set or refine out of shampoo. I use a lot of shampoo, ducky."

"Anyway, you take the bloke's filler cap off and put mine on, instead. Still with me? Five minutes later the petrol fumes rot the plugs out of the tubes. Magic mixture starts dripping in. If the road's bumpy it takes a couple of minutes. Smooth driving, it could be another five. Ten minutes, start to finish, whatever the conditions."

The Expert sat back, beaming. His client stared back.

"Remember, fourteen sticks of dynamite in a single gallon. My stuff lights the dynamite." The Expert raised his voice in song. "Flash-bang-wallop, what a pickcher."

He slapped his hands together, making the client start. "Ker-rump. Know what I mean?"

Chair legs scraped. "It will kill him?"

"Won't do him any good," came the dry response. "O'course it'll kill him. Barbecue him, give him multiple injuries, massive shock to the central nervous system, prolly break his neck with the old

whiplash if he's wearing a seatbelt. Kill him three or four different ways at once," the Expert crowed.

Gilchrist-Bradford surged to his feet. "So be it. I'm satisfied."

"That's nice. You'd better not come here again, squire. Find out what sort of a petrol cap we need, then ring me. All you need to say, lockable flap and screw-in, lockable cap, or plain cap. Nothing about who you are or whether it's me talking. I'm the only one answers this phone and I'll know what you're on about."

The client went away and the Expert counted the money.

Three hours later the phone rang. "Plain cap."

"Thank you, sir. Kings Arms, by the traffic lights, six o'clock, saloon bar."

The Expert was drinking lager and lime and watching the TV set above the bar when the client arrived. Gilchrist-Bradford put his hat down on the taped parcel which the Expert had left on the table.

Without looking at him the Expert said, "Drink up and steam off, squire. I'm always in here until half-seven."

"I've been thinking," the client muttered. "Supposing it goes off while the car's parked, with nobody in it?"

The Expert paled, his cheekbones suddenly thrusting at tight skin. "Not here, stupid! Shut up and steam off; I tell you! The car's got to be moving for the stuff to work, that's the beauty of it. Get on with it!"

Again the blush. "Terribly sorry, old chap. Bad form on my part. I'm a chump."

"Shut up and steam off, you berk!" So the client left, holding his hat like a basin, his soiled dogskin gloves hiding the little parcel.

Later that evening the client was being discussed behind his back.

He was entertaining a minor government official from one of the Gulf states. World stocks of concrete were in short supply, and he had spent to the hilt, with the Expert. Now, under yet another name, the client was arranging for the unauthorized transfer, from a mythical building firm at a false address in Munich, of imaginary stockpiles of concrete.

Renee and Liz, club hostesses who had worked for the Major before, were waiting to meet the two men as if by accident, recognize an old friend, and add sexual euphoria to the official's greed.

"The Major hasn't half aged," said Liz, who had wintered in Spain at an embezzling film producer's villa. "Sort of shrunk. And he needs a haircut. The Major was always so nicely turned out. For his age, like."

Renee pulled a face. "Poor old sod. Haven't you heard? Prolly not, he got drunk at my place the other night and blabbed it all out. You prolly never knew he had a daughter."

"Him? He's not married."

"What's that got to do with it? Yuh, he had a daughter. Droned on and on about her, he did. Made me want to scream, him hammering the gin and saying hōw she was a saint and all that. Still, it's sad."

"What is? Honest, Reen, you can't tell a story to save your life."

"Ta, for the compliment. Well, she was straight, see. You know, honest as the day is long. Worked in that department store by the Common, the place that burned down last year. You must have seen it, your bus goes past there."

"I don't care to use public transport, dear."

"All right, duchess. You know the place all the same. She got caught in the basement."

"Ooh, burned up, poor little cow."

"Smoke and fumes, he thought at first. Not a mark on her. Showed me her photo, taken before, I mean. She was all right, nothing special. Except to the Major, of course."

At that moment the Expert, driving home, discovered exactly how long it took his device to become operative.



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The author, Evelyn Harband, is a grandmother. At the time she submitted her first story, she had four grandchildren, "ages 5, 4, 2, and 1." Mrs. Harband and her husband recently collaborated on a series of nonfiction vignettes for "CB Magazine" (Citizen Band Radio), under the heading "REACTIONS from the Golden Gate."

Mrs. Harband's hobbies include portrait painting, bowling, bridge, and gardening. "So," she wrote us, "I manage to keep busy now that our three children are into their own lives, one a professor of mathematics, one a CPA, and one in advertising art" . . .

THE BOY WHO LIKED ARITHMETIC

by EVELYN HARBAND

It pleased something deep in Billyjo's nature when things balanced out—like the two sticks of the same length and thickness from which he had laboriously whittled a slingshot and with which he could now hit with precision little rocks or cans set out in the back yard; or like the two gnarled and ancient trees that grew sturdily against the front of the old shingled farmhouse and cast their shadows evenly across the yard when the orange sun disappeared behind the Washita Mountains. Two eyes, two ears, two feet, two hands—even nature shared his deep desire for symmetry in all things.

And of course his actions must balance out too. If he did something bad, though he might not have meant it, he must search for something good to do: that was a basic urge in Billyjo, a creed, a kind of secret vow.

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Billyjo had just turned 13. That was not a good number. It stood alone and lonely, like Billyjo himself, with nothing to offset its isolation but his thoughts. He leaned against the sagging picket fence that divided the front yard from the rutted lane that led to the road to town, idly scuffing the dry dirt with his sneakers, watching the mockingbirds in their swift flight, swinging back and forth across the front of the house, drawn irresistibly to the two trees. How good it must feel to be that free, he mused, not to have to worry about the endless farm chores, or why your Ma was always down on you, or where your Pa was.

At 12, and before that, he remembered some good times. He had been 12 at the beginning of summer, just before his Pa went away. Further back he could remember when things went right, when the earth and the sky and the weather all worked together to bring in a good harvest for his Pa to load into the old truck and take to market. After such times the three of them, his Ma, his Pa and Billyjo, in their Sunday clothes, would pile into the old truck and ride the ten miles into town to take in a picture show, maybe even have dinner at Murphy's Restaurant. One time his teacher had been there and she had stopped by their table just to tell his parents how well Billyjo was doing in school.

"Your son's a fine scholar, Mr. Jorgensen," she had said, smiling in her friendly way at Billyjo. "You've a right to be very proud of him." Billyjo had felt his cheeks turn red, embarrassed and elated at the same time.

"Well, now, Miss," his mother had answered, "it's right nice of you to stop by and tell us that about Billyjo." She pursed her thin lips. "But then schoolin' don't help a farmer that much, I say. My Pa didn't have no schoolin' and he done right well with the farm."

"Why, there's lots of things Billyjo can learn about farming in school," his teacher had said. "Later on he might even go to agricultural college and learn new ways of farming."

"Don't you worry none, we'll do for our son what has to be done," he heard his father say, in the same tone he always used to put an end to Billyjo's chatter. "But it's been very nice talking to you, Miss—"

"Evans. Aleta Evans." His teacher smiled brightly at Billyjo. "See you on Monday, then, Billyjo." He nodded mutely, ducking his head so no one could see the adoration in his eyes.

Miss Evans was one of the reasons Billyjo couldn't wait to get to school each morning, but only one. He enjoyed learning about

new things, especially arithmetic which was so logical. In arithmetic two and two always made four. That satisfied Billyjo's urge for balance. It was a kind of magic that never disappointed him. He had tried to talk about it once with his father.

"Pa, did you like arithmetic in school?"

"How in blazes can I remember that far back? Anyways, I never had much schoolin' myself and what I had, I didn't cotton to, as I recall."

"I like school a lot, Pa. 'Specially arithmetic. Why, you can take all these different numbers, turn them around and about, and they always seem to end up like they should. I do like it a whole lot, Pa, and I'll be learnin' even more about it, the more schoolin' I get."

"Listen, kid, you'll be lucky we'll be able to send you to high school. You're too young, I reckon, to know about it, but there's what they call a depression goin' around. And the way these fields is dryin' up and blowin' away, it's a wonder we still got food on the table. But your Ma is that stubborn she can't see it's no good any more. I'm plumb wore out tryin' to make a go of things."

His father waved one big callused fist toward the fields he had laboriously cleared for the coming corn crop. "It'd better be good this year," he muttered to himself, frowning under the brim of his battered straw hat, "or I'll git out this time for sure." He stared angrily at Billyjo. "Go on now, go do your chores. I got no more time to waste."

All right, but I was goin' anyways, Billyjo thought defiantly. I'll find some way to stay in school, you'll see.

Still, Billyjo remembered, his father had done some nice things for him. When Billyjo was seven or eight, his father had dug a little plot at the side of the house for Billyjo to plant his own little vegetable garden, just like the big one his mother tended in the back yard. Billyjo had patted out the dirt so that the rows were neat and even and had faithfully watered and nurtured the tender crops of radishes and carrots and tomatoes.

"I swear, Billyjo, you're a born farmer, just like my Pa and his Pa before him," his mother had beamed. The unaccustomed praise made him tingle with pride and he would stand behind her, straining to see, as she mingled his crops with hers when she did the canning, stirring the contents of the great iron pot, sending up a fragrant geyser of delicious steamy odors.

"Now you're just in my way, Billyjo," his mother cautioned. "If

you ain't got nothin' else to do, git on down to the cellar and fetch me a couple of jars of corn. We'll be needin' them for supper. But mind you be careful," she called after him, "that the door don't shut on you. Your Pa ain't got around to fixin' that latch yet and you can't get back out, it's rusted so."

She blew angrily at a wisp of hair on her steam-dampened forehead. "I swear, that man gets lazier every day," she muttered fretfully, "lettin' everythin' around here just go to seed."

Billyjo liked to linger in the cool, dim, musty cellar where his mother's homemade jams of apples and peaches and strawberries and jars of corn and green beans and tomatoes stood like fat colorful little soldiers on the wooden shelves. When he had removed one or two, he would rearrange their positions, so many on one side, the same number on the other, so that they marched precisely and evenly again.

On cool spring days he sat high beside his father, watching the heavy-muscle arms steer the old tractor, and he would look back in admiration at the deep furrows trailing evenly behind.

Yes, some things were good then, but not the anger, not the night sounds of slamming doors and raised voices that disturbed his sleep so that he shivered in his bed, eyes wide in the dark, tense with anxiety, his fists clenched at his sides. At such times he tried to blot out the image of his parents in the kitchen below, his mother in her frayed wine-colored robe, her thin sunburned face distorted with the rage that shook loose her heavy gray-streaked hair, habitually pinned in a tight knot against the back of her neck; and his father, in his mended plaid shirt and faded overalls, shouting against her shouts, the bitter arguments carrying unmuted up the uncarpeted stairs and through the thin age-streaked walls.

"What do you want to hang onto this old place for anyways, Sarah? It's old and fallin' apart and I can't keep up with it no more, what with the drought and all."

"If you'd complain less, you'd git more done, I say."

"It's just too much work, woman. How many times I got to tell you that? I'm bone-tired. I can't take much more, I'm warnin' you."

"You ain't give it a fair chance. You promised to do that. You promised me that, and my Pa, too, 'fore he died. He handed you over a nice farm and look what you done with it. Can't put my hand to nothin' that isn't fallin' down every which way."

"I'm sick-to death of hearin' about your Pa. Anyways, that was fourteen years ago I promised. I give it all I got. I'm sick of tryin'." His heavy fist slammed against the wooden table top. "I hate this place! Ain't no kind of a life to be stuck out here, miles from anywheres. I was born in the city and I shoulda stayed there. I like people around, someone to talk to sometimes."

"Well you ain't goin' to talk me into sellin'. You hear me, Joe? I ain't sellin' my farm and that's final!"

The arguments had reached their peak with the loss of the spring crop before Billyjo's thirteenth birthday. The eagerly awaited rain had turned into an unseasonable heavy hail, big as eggs, that had ruined the first tender sprouts of corn, and all the back-breaking work of the spring was lost in an hour.

Billyjo could hardly bear to look out into the fields, at the torn and trampled crop lying this way and that, deformed and cruelly crushed. Between his parents, words like "money" and "city" and "job" were shot like bullets into the air, his father at first pleading, then ominously silent. The angry words had frightened Billyjo, but now the tense silence between them was even more terrifying.

Then, one morning, he had awakened to find his father gone. Sometime during the night he had packed his meager belongings into a knapsack and disappeared. Billyjo's bewildered inquiries met with only a sour "He's gone—and good riddance" from his mother. "And don't ask me where he went to, Billyjo, 'cause I don't know and I don't care."

"I won't sell the farm. I won't leave it," she would repeat over and over, her voice rising, looking not at Billyjo, but nowhere in particular, her mouth set and grim. "It was my pa's and my grandpa's before him and nothing, *nothing* will make me leave it." She would clutch Billyjo to her. "You'll have to take on more chores, Billyjo, now he's gone. Soon you'll be growed enough to do a man's work. We'll make a go of it, you'll see."

Billyjo missed his father, remembering the occasional sound of his unbridled uproarious laugh, his big presence in the plaid shirt and jeans, the way he had, sometimes, of making each chore into some kind of game so that you were glad to be doing it. But then resentment would override the memories. He didn't even say goodbye to me, Billyjo thought, he didn't care enough about me to even do that.

His mother hurried him from early dawn when he was shaken

awake to struggle, still groggy with sleep, into his jeans, until sundown when, almost too exhausted to eat, he would gulp down the evening meal and stumble up to bed. She hardly spoke to him beyond her constant complaint, "Don't be so pokey, Billyjo. It don't have to be done *perfect*, just get it *done*!"

The words struck against the very core of Billyjo's sense of balance. Didn't she understand that everything *had* to be done properly or it wouldn't even out, whether it was milking the cow, gathering the eggs, feeding the chickens, tending her garden crop while she labored out in the fields, or the countless other chores that cropped up each day in an unending succession now that there was just the two of them?

No more time to loiter carefree in the lane, aiming idly at rocks with his slingshot or to watch the mountains change color with the waning sunlight, hazing purple far to the west. No more time to swing, daydreaming, in the rude string hammock that hung between the two apple trees out back; or to escape to the dim parlor where someone, long ago, had collected a small store of books: *Robinson Crusoe*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *A Christmas Carol*, and *Treasure Island*, books that he read and replaced with care to be read again.

His hands blistered and toughened and in the small of his back there was a constant ache. He began to hate the farm, to shrink away from his mother when occasionally she rumbled his hair with a few words of praise.

"You're doin' good, real good, Billyjo. It's not too bad, is it?" Her mouth tightened. "We don't need anyone who ain't got the gump-tion to stick it out against a little hard work."

"No, Ma," Billyjo would force himself to answer. He would try hard to still the repugnance for the farm that was taking hold of him. I won't be like my Pa, he vowed. He did wrong to go, to leave me alone like this.

The longing for the end of summer was almost a physical ache. He would go back to school at the end of summer, back to his books that opened up whole new worlds for him, worlds outside the sagging farmhouse and the dry and tortured fields; back to his beloved arithmetic lessons; back to Miss Evans and her pleasant smile. He would have to get up earlier to do his chores and hurry back from school to finish his work, but at least he would be away from the farm for a good part of the day.

Now his spirits lifted magically as he smoothed the scuffed-up

dirt with the toe of one sneaker and moved away from the fence. Only one more week to go, he thought happily. I'll work extra hard this week so Ma will be pleased with me.

The rooster woke Billyjo on the Saturday before the start of school. He lay there sleepily, hugging the thought that now there was just two more days. He could dawdle about in bed this morning. On the last Saturday of the month his ma got up early to drive the old truck into town to buy needed groceries and other necessities, taking the few dollars, jealously hoarded throughout the month, from an old earthen cookie jar in a high cupboard over the sink.

He stretched contentedly. Through his uncurtained window he could see a few clouds on the horizon, their furry edges beginning to pinken in anticipation of the sun. Well, best get up now, anyway, he thought. I'll get everything done 'fore she gets back. That'll put her in a good humor.

He dressed leisurely, then went yawning down into the kitchen. He was surprised to find his mother still there, sitting at the kitchen table and sipping coffee.

"Mornin', Billyjo," she greeted him.

"Ain't you goin' into town, Ma?"

"Later, Billyjo. Sit down. Have your breakfast. I made some pancakes for you. I guess you get sick of cereal all the time."

"Yeah, I sure do love pancakes, Ma." He sat down opposite her and poured syrup over the pancakes. It was the first time in a long while that she had sat so, and greeted him so. He smiled at her. She returned the smile but underneath he felt a tenseness that made him uncomfortable. After a while he stopped eating. "Is anything the matter, Ma?"

"No, 'course not, Billyjo. I'm just noticin' how brown you've got and how you're beginnin' to fill out. You're beginnin' to look just like my pa, God rest his soul."

"Am I, Ma?"

"You sure enough are." She shifted in her chair, smoothed back her hair with one hand and took another sip of coffee. "You never saw a picture of him 'cause he didn't hold with wastin' money for those kind of things. No more do I," she added quickly. "Though it would be nice now," she went on reflectively, "if I did have a picture of him and Ma, just to sort of remember them by. And then you could see how much you look like him."

"Yes'm." Billyjo started in on his pancakes again. It was very

unlike his mother to chat with him, but he liked it. He wished he could think of something to say.

"Your grandpa spent his whole life on this farm," his mother continued. The far-away look that didn't see anything was in her eyes again. "He never went no farther away than to bring the crops to market. Weren't no need for it, he said. There was everything' here a body could need or want. He surely loved this farm, and your grandma did too, though she died when I was only seven. If they didn't have farmers, my pa used to say, why then nobody would have anythin' to eat. Just think of that, Billyjo. What you and me is doin' is the reason everybody is able to stay alive. Now that's somethin', ain't it?"

"Yeah, Ma." Billyjo nodded. "That's good, all right, but—"

"It's hard work, I know," she went on, unhearing, "but it's worth it. This here's a good farm and it'll be yours, Billyjo, when I'm gone, don't forget that."

"No, Ma, I won't. But—"

"So the thing is, Billyjo—I been thinkin'—well, I been thinkin' it would just be a waste of time for you to go back to school."

Billyjo jerked his head up. "Wha—what do you mean, Ma?"

"Just what I say." She put the coffee down and rubbed at the back of her neck with both hands. "You're needed here. I can't do it by myself and I don't have the money for a hired hand."

"But—but, Mama, I like school. I have to go. I *want* to go!" Billyjo pushed away his plate and jumped from the chair. "I have to go to school so I can go on to college," he blurted.

"College! I know who put that daft idea into your head. That know-it-all teacher! If that's all you learned in school, how to want things you can't have, it's just a good thing you're not goin' back!"

"Mama, please—" Billyjo pleaded, the tears welling into his eyes. He dug at them angrily with his fists. "I have to go, I just have to!"

"Now listen to me, Billyjo. You been a good boy up till now and you're learnin' to help out real good. Schoolin's just a waste of time. You don't need schoolin' to work a farm."

"But I don't *want* to be a farmer," he screamed, his voice cracking. "I *never* wanted to be one, any more than my pa did. I don't like it. I hate it! I hate it!" The words seemed to lift a leaden weight from Billyjo's shoulders. Now she would understand, she must understand.

His mother rose swiftly. She came at him and he felt the full weight of her open palm against his cheek.

"Don't you dare say that!" Her scream matched his, as it had his father's. "You're too young to know anythin' at all, not what you want and not what's good for you. You hear me, Billyjo?"

"Yes, Ma," he sobbed, rubbing at his cheek.

She turned from him, breathing hard, and began to clear the table. After a moment she said grudgingly, "I'm sorry I hit you, Billyjo. But you got to understand right now that your ma knows what's the best thing for you. You'll thank me for it one of these days."

She paused to put one arm around Billyjo's shoulder. "The world's not goin' to come to an end, believe me. Well," she turned from him, "I haven't got all day to sit around this kitchen. I got to get to town and pick up the supplies. While I'm there, I might's well tell your teacher you ain't goin' back."

She glanced toward Billyjo who stood mutely, his cheeks tear-stained, his hands hanging limply at his sides. "Now don't worry none—she'll understand soon's I tell her why. Go on now," she commanded, "you finish up your breakfast and then go on out and start spading up that piece of ground out back for some plantin'."

"In a minute, Ma." He watched her disappear through the kitchen door and down the back steps, heard the gasp of the ancient motor wheeze fitfully to life, the grinding of the gears, the gradually diminishing roar as the old truck pulled away up the lane.

He sat down at the table, his mind numb. He looked down at his work-callused hands lying palms up on his lap. They looked like his father's hands now, his father who had left him all alone, who had forced Billyjo to take his place. He got up restlessly and moved to the kitchen window and looked out at the vegetable garden, over to the barn and out into the fields that his mother had begun to clear away with the tractor.

The sun was coming up, blood-red, with a kind of smoke over it that reminded Billyjo of fire. He clasped his hands together, wringing them in the manner of an old man. He began to tremble. He had a feeling inside him as if he would burst wide open if he let himself go. He breathed a long ragged sigh.

He stared into the sun until his eyes could no longer bear the brightness. Then he turned and walked to the old black stove. The matches were on the shelf above and he reached up and took a

handful. He walked slowly back to the window, struck a match on the sill, and set fire to the faded gingham curtains.

Without waiting to watch the flames, he walked out into the hall and turned into the dim parlor. He struck another match and held it to the closed drapes. They were an old and heavy velvet and he had to strike several more matches before eager flames began to spread to the overstuffed sofa against the window.

Then he gathered up the four books, tucked them under his arm, and threw the rest of the matches on the carpet. He walked out to the front porch, down the steps, out into the lane and up toward the road.

For some reason he felt uncomfortable. Then he realized that until he had offset the bad thing he had just done with something good, it wouldn't turn out even.

Perhaps he would think of something after he found his father.

"Q"

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a NEW Chinese detective story by
MacLEAN O'SPELIN

Vincent Starrett, who knew more about the Chinese detective-crime-mystery story than any other American critic, once wrote: "The detective story as we know it today would appear to have been unknown in China until the first translation of the Sherlock Holmes saga, probably sometime in the 1890s. Thereafter, native practitioners took over, and Holmes became a popular figure in their literature for the masses" . . . Here is what might be called a neoclassical Chinese adventure in inferential reasoning . . .

THE ADVENTURE OF
LA SOUPE CHINOISE

by MacLEAN O'SPELIN

In the long ago and far simpler days when Honorable Shih Lok and I first became fast friends, the French still ruled Cochinchina. Thus, while the restaurant on rue du Boulanger in Cho-Lon above which Shih occupied a modest compartment was owned and operated by Szechuanese, its sign said in large gold letters: Le Palais de Jade.

Because Le Palais was convenient, when Honorable Shih remembered to eat, he took his meals there. And while I prefer the milder, more nutritious diet of my native Canton, I admit that Szechuanese cuisine is temptingly aromatic (I commend to you Lacquered Duck of Seven Perfumes). It is deliciously savory, too, if you relish fare that is spicy. Fiery as a dragon's heart, in fact.

I also admit that 25 grains of black pepper, or red, or even the tongue-searing poivre du Cambodge is a traditional specific in the treatment of colic, enteritis, and la rhume. But as the venerated sage, K'ung Fu-tze, has said, ancient tradition can be a many-thumbed, addle-pated physician.

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Confucius, as Westerners distort his name, was right. My experience has shown that, used by the handful in the Szechuanese way, pepper gradually gnaws lesions in the delicate membranes of the upper colon. Despite tradition, it is, chemically, a corrosive.

A corroded upper colon corrodes the disposition. And so it was that I blamed Le Palais for Shih's fits of waspishness. "Why is it, most learned Wa Tze-na," he would suddenly rasp, "that your cultured Cantonese lips cannot correctly form the humble name Shih?"

That stung. But I didn't take it meekly. "Honorable and unpronounceable Shih, the classic accent of your pearl-like Peking clangs in my ears like a counterfeit tin gong."

Quickly—for Shih is not insensitive—he would shake his head ruefully and murmur, "Ten thousand pardons, good Dr. Wa Tze-na."

But his dyspeptic moods grew so frequent that finally I prescribed soupe chinoise. Although not actually a Chinese dish, it was widely known in South Asia and was very wholesome. And made without pepper.

It had been the French who with typical Western inaccuracy dubbed it "soupe chinoise." Unhappily the name clung. Even, I must confess, Shih and I called it that. Because, rather than wrangle endlessly over the vast differences between his Peking speech and my Cantonese, we conversed in French, the lingua franca of polyglot Cho-Lon.

And in Cho-Lon the misnamed Chinese soup was sold everywhere, even on street corners. But I persuaded Honorable Shih to take only the best, that made in Uncle T'ou Kai's small restaurant not far along rue du Boulanger from Shih's own entryway.

Uncle, as T'ou Kai was universally known, was white haired and semiretired but still round and spry. Fond of children, dogs, parakeets, and Chinese dominoes, he dispensed amiability along with the nourishing mixture of morsels of meat, tender mein, coriander leaves, pak-choy, and diced whatever-else-was-on-hand that made his soupe a local staple.

As Shih Lok's colon and disposition healed, he and Uncle grew to be firm friends and when Shih had eaten his soupe and was not otherwise occupied they would often retire to Uncle's house behind the restaurant for a companionable game of dominoes. My prescription proved to be a complete success.

So the evening I found Honorable Shih in his compartment studying a thumbprint of Uncle's with a magnifying glass, "Sacred eyes of Buddha!" I cried. "You? Investigating our good friend?"

"Mere routine, Wa Tze-na. Calm yourself," he said as he handed me the bank draft he was examining. Recently drawn on a French bank, it was payable to T'ou Kai, rue du Boulanger, Cho-Lon, Cochinchina, and it bore his thumbprint on the back, a form of indorsement common in largely illiterate Cho-Lon. "It compares satisfactorily with the bank's sample print," said Shih. "Yet somehow it disturbs me."

Taking the glass and the bank's file card with the sample print on it, I tried to make a comparison. I knew much about anatomy and the human dermis but little of Bertillon's theories, so my response was tentative. "The print on the check seems slightly blurred, but the different inks used would account for that, I suspect. Otherwise the two prints are twins." I handed everything back to him. "The check, I take it, is Uncle's monthly annuity?"

Brow furrowed, he nodded. Essentially a scholar, his all-absorbing ambition was to search out and collate definitive evidence that the sixth century B.C. moralist, Lao-tze, originated both Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism. But, in Asia, scholars are rewarded with immense respect and no money. So, to finance his monumental undertaking, he worked on occasion for Assurances Orientales, S.A., a French insurance firm that specialized in annuities for Asians.

Insurance fraud is not as widespread in Asia as in the more enlightened West, but it can occur. To track it down in Cho-Lon, Assurances Orientales employed Chinese with investigative talent. As Honorable Shih's research on Lao-tze required considerable digging out and weighing of evidence and much of what he called inferential reasoning, Shih was eminently qualified.

Most of his work was routine, such as checking indorsements against file cards. But when a case of fraud did develop, he solved it with nearly the same dispatch as that renowned British detective of whose exploits even Asia had heard. Indeed, the great Holmes's deductive technique, Shih claimed, closely resembled his own inferential reasoning.

"Come, good friend Wa Tze-na," he said, suddenly animated. "It is high time we took today's soupe. I have not seen Uncle in nearly a month and, unless memory misleads, he still owes me eleven piasters."

Shih's sole vice was gambling for small stakes. In those days he was a regular in the casinos of Le Grand Monde, the famous gambling concession that covered five hectares of central Cho-Lon, but his gambling was in no way an obsession. More like a taste for a mild drug, one of the relaxants, say. Relaxing for him, perhaps, because he nearly always won.

Descending the steep stairway to the rue du Boulanger (another French misnomer—not a single baker was to be found in its entire length), we saw that it was teeming as always, and echoing with the cheerful uproar of a Chinese street, one outside today's grim gray China. Vendors and hawkers, women balancing water pails on long poles, children playing under foot, pousse-pousse drivers, portly rice merchants—each one using his voice at its topmost limit.

Most were Chinese, but there was a generous spicing of tunic-clad Tonkinese, turbaned Sikhs, Siamese and Malays in colorful sarongs, even two French sailors with red ponpons on their hats. A soupe chinoise of a street. Basic ingredients, plus a flavorful dash of whatever-else-was-on-hand.

For the past three years Uncle T'ou Kai had left the running of his restaurant in the wrinkled but capable hands of his chief cook, one of his many female cousins. And that evening her soupe chinoise was particularly tasty. The pak-choy had been freshly cut, the meat was sweet and succulent, and tonight the whatever-else-was-on-hand was diced pickled pig's esophagus—a delicacy I always looked forward to.

Chinese cooks waste nothing, as you know, and the results of their frugality enhance many a dish. If you have the opportunity, try sea slug, sliced very thin and sautéed with strips of fresh webbing from duck's feet. Lip-smacking, truly.

But Honorable Shih was no gourmet. As ever he ate mechanically, his eyes roaming over the other diners restlessly.

Many had been patients of mine and I nodded and waved my porcelain spoon in response to their shouted but respectful greetings. And soon La Cousine, as the cook-manager was known, appeared from the kitchen to bow low and say, "Venerated Dr. Wa Tze-na and all-wise Honorable Shih Lok, your presence brightens this poor place like an exalted flame."

She spoke in Cantonese and I saw that Shih missed many of her words. His loss, I thought uncharitably. Still, he was my friend, so I used our lingua franca, French, to thank La Cousine

and compliment her extravagantly on the excellence of tonight's soupe.

As her thin creased face lit with pleasure, Shih turned his gaze on her. "Is revered Uncle ready for our game this evening?"

I looked at him in surprise. He and I had planned to go on to Le Grand Monde for a session with the mah-jongg tiles.

La Cousine, too, seemed surprised. "Uncle on voyage. To motherland," she said in flustered pidgin French. "To village of sacred ancestors."

Ignoring her words, Shih rose. "Come, Wa Tze-na. We will await Uncle."

I had not finished my soupe and I said so indignantly. But his tall lean figure was already pushing through the door to the kitchen, with La Cousine close behind, protesting loudly. "Uncle come next week. Next month, maybe. Not this night, Honorable Shih Lok."

The door swung shut, cutting off her increasingly shrill tones. Pausing only to pick out and eat the last bits of meat, my chopsticks flying, I hurried after them, annoyance growing at every step.

Steam from the cauldrons of soupe simmering in the kitchen obscured my vision momentarily and I stopped to get my bearings amid the clutter of utensils and sacks of mein and crocks and jars and plucked chickens and ducks dangling from the low ceiling.

Then I again heard La Cousine's protesting voice and I groped my way toward it and through the open door leading to the house.

Shih had planted himself on a wooden stool and was looking around the main room, oblivious of the frantic woman. I reached for her thin wrist, all bones and ligaments, and took her pulse—always an effective way to calm an overwrought female. "Contain yourself, good Cousine. Otherwise you will need to come to my office for a treatment."

Alarm flickered in her eyes. I added quickly, "No, no, there will be no fee. And no treatment at all if you will but calm yourself."

Shih glanced at her. "Stop caterwauling, woman. T'ou Kai's word is as the richest gold. He will arrive in time, just as we agreed."

That set her off again. Really, I was ashamed of my friend. Forcing his way into a private house on the thinnest of pretexts! Simply to earn a fee as investigator for a French insurance company!

Gently I led La Cousine into another room, one she shared with others of Uncle's horde of relatives. This time I quieted her by giving her a placebo from a vial I carry for her kind of ailment—incipient hysteria.

Then I guided her to her pallet and eased her thin body down on it. "Rest now, Cousine. Honorable Shih Lok is not himself to-night." I left her muttering to herself but at least partly pacified.

In the other room Shih still sat on his hard stool, his chin in hand. Looking around, I saw nothing to stimulate inferential reasoning, if that was what he was up to.

A simple altar table in one corner held gilt Buddhas, joss sticks, and a modest offering of fruit in a polished brass bowl. A few woven mats on the floor, more stools, a long plank table, portraits of ancestors on two of the walls. A typical Chinese room in Cho-Lon.

Except for a personal touch of Uncle's—two beautifully crafted bamboo birdcages hanging by the single window, in each a green-and-yellow parakeet watching us with bright eyes. And now that the room was again tranquil, they began to chirp and whistle, tentatively at first, then, as they gained confidence, more loudly. Soon they were chattering and gossiping merrily together like human members of Uncle's family.

Their not unpleasant din gave me a momentary sense of something missing. But I was far too annoyed to stop to ponder what it might be.

"Shih Lok," I said sharply, "your behavior is a disgrace. A shameful disgrace. You have seriously and needlessly upset that poor old woman. I demand that we leave at once."

Again surprising me, he rose, smiling blandly. "As always, honored Doctor, your prescription is as right as the tenets of Lao-tze. Yes, we must leave at once. Le Grand Monde awaits." And off he went.

I lingered to say a few more soothing words to La Cousine and then I took time to see to it that in her absence the various relatives who helped in the restaurant were discharging their duties properly.

By the time I reached the street, Shih had hailed a motorized pousse-pousse, a type of hell-born, rickety machine I detested. But he merely laughed at my complaints, so, rather than wrangle in public, I climbed in warily. Instantly and with a demonic roar the machine plunged fiercely into the tumult of Cho-Lon traffic.

Unlike the more civilized pedicabs and rickshaws, a pousse-

pousse is constructed so that the passengers sit low to the ground and out in front of the driver. Thus buffered and protected, a Cho-Lon pousse-pousse driver fearlessly flings caution to the unpredictable monsoon winds. Completely unprotected, his passengers can only clutch at the slippery seat and pray fervently to the spirits of their ancestors.

Fortunately that night the ghosts of our ancestors—or mine, at least—saw us through. But when we dismounted at the entrance of Le Grand Monde, I made a point of standing to one side while Honorable Shih searched out enough piasters for the fare.

Inside the huge gambling concession my mood improved somewhat. I enjoy mah-jongg even though I do not pretend to be an expert player. I am too readily distracted by the beauty of the bamboo-backed ivory tiles with their exquisitely carved ideographs. Even the cool smoothness of the long slender ivory counters takes my mind off the play.

So when Shih and I go out for an evening's gambling, I never play at his table. He claims he always beats me because of the ease with which he reads my face. Nonsense.

He wins because he takes no pleasure in the feel of old ivory, the mellow clack of the tiles, the beauty of carved Chinese calligraphy, or even in the cheery jokes of the winners and the caustic retorts of the losers.

Perfect concentration is the key, he insists. Very true, I suppose—in any event, he won again that night. His talent was, in a way, wasted. With it he could have played with the classic Cho-Lon gamblers, the inscrutable professionals. And he could have beaten them.

Instead, he chose to play for modest stakes and to leave a game before he had won enough to discommode the other players. That night, I believe, he won 17 piasters.

Contrary to what you may be thinking I, too, won. Four piasters. Just enough to pay for the peaceful pedicab ride back to rue du Boulanger. But, annoyance still pricking me, I again stood aside while Shih paid.

Upstairs in his compartiment he poured us our customary nightcap, a dram of mou-t'ai, the finest rice brandy in the world, distilled near Canton. As also was our custom, we sipped it rather than tossed it down our throats in the traditional kom-pei fashion.

The gambling had relaxed him. And the fire of the mou-t'ai burned away almost all traces of my displeasure. Tacitly, how-

ever, we avoided the subject of his abominable behavior to La Cousine. But, all at once, remembering, I clapped my hands and exclaimed, "It was the dog!"

"Aha! The yap-yap of the dog. The snick-snick of its teeth."

"No, no," I said, "the dog did not bite. The dog did not bark."

"Exactly! 'The dog in the nighttime'—a classic of deduction."

I bristled. "Do not prate to me of classics. Don't you understand? The dog was not there."

"Nor was Uncle T'ou Kai."

And that was all I could get out of him. Not that I wanted more. Not from an overbearing emigrant from that false pearl, Peking. But the thought of Peking reminded me that the dog in question was also from there, and suddenly my spirits lifted.

A pampered, crochety Pekinese dog that, unaccountably, old Uncle T'ou Kai doted on. Lion dogs, those Peking-bred beasts are called. Hyena dogs, if Uncle's crafty little brute was typical of the breed.

Yes, crafty. It fawned on Uncle. And pretended to fawn on others. Then, one's suspicions lulled, it would waddle silently around behind and—snick-snick!—its needle teeth would meet in the fleshy part of one's calf.

But the fact that the Honorable Shih and the hyena dog were both Pekinese continued to tickle my provincial Cantonese fancy and I said good night almost gaily.

It was two weeks before I saw Honorable Shih again. Busy with my medical practice, I found time to stop by rue du Boulanger only twice. Each time the sturdy middle-aged Tonkinese boyesse who tidied Shih's compartiment and did his washing knew only that he was away "à la campagne."

Then one evening I found him in. His trip to the countryside, he said, had taken him all the way to T'ou Kai's ancestral village.

"You found him, then?"

"No, good Wa Tze-na. But, as I feared, our poor friend is dead."

"Dead! Great soul of Kwan Ti! Uncle dead? How?"

He gestured wearily. "The soupe chinoise put me on the scent."

He had lost me. "You smelled something bad in the soupe?"

"Of course not." He scowled at me. "It was you who smelled something good—and said so."

I scowled back. "You go too far with your Pekinese riddles, Shih Lok."

He had the grace to look momentarily contrite. "Forgive me, good friend. The journey was long." He shifted in his chair as if he were uncomfortable. "It was the meat, Wa Tze-na. The meat in the soupe."

Icy fingers dug deep in my viscera. "You don't mean—La Cousine—she chopped up—diced—" I could not go on.

He eyed me sourly for a long moment as if studying something he could not quite believe existed. Then, "Have you lost your senses?"

Stiffly and formally I told him that I had not lost my senses. He gave a twisted half smile. "Chinese are not cannibals, Dr. Wa Tze-na."

Exasperation overcame me and I snapped, "For once, Shih Lok, speak a straight sentence. What happened to Tou Kai?"

"Good Wa Tze-na, true Wa Tze-na, try to say Shih properly. Pray try. As if it were the chir in chirugien—"

"I am not a surgeon," I interjected brusquely. "I am a doctor of Chinese medicine."

He did not hear me. "Or," he was saying, "try it as the shir in that abomination of the Western world, shirred eggs."

"I know nothing of Western eggs." Then the impropriety of arguing at such a time struck me and I smiled, a shade sheepishly. "Shir," I pronounced, humoring him. "Shir. How is that, friend Lok?"

"Admirable, my dear Wa Tze-na, admirable."

"Thank you. Now then, the taste of la soupe chinoise?"

"The dog."

I paused to recollect that night's soupe. "Hm... sweet meat. Succulent. Fat, pampered, well-fed Pekinese. Yes. Rather like suckling pig. Or the agneau de lait our French friends enjoy so much."

He shuddered. "I have eaten my last soupe chinoise."

"Not if you value your upper colon," I said. "But I still do not understand how the dog in the soupe made you suspect that Uncle was dead."

His face had lost color but, with an effort, he said, "Chinese cooks waste nothing. And, as you know, that dog was detested in Uncle's household. Understandably so. But while Uncle lived, no one dared harm it."

"Of course," I said as the picture unfolded in my mind. "And after Uncle died, the dog went snick-snick once too often. And, like

Uncle, was sent to rest with his ancestors." Suddenly suspicion flooded my mind in a dark wave. "T'ou Kai was murdered! For his annuity!"

"No, Wa Tze-na. He died of the weak heart of fat men. Peacefully."

"A common malady." Even though Uncle was dead, I was much relieved.

A groan escaped Shih's lips. "Quick, Wa Tze-na. My belly twists like a python in its death throes. Quick, Wa Tze-na, the needle!"

I had already diagnosed his ailment as an attack of mild but painful colitis. Brought on by what? The loss of a friend? A friend who died still owing him eleven piasters? No, that was unkind. Perhaps it was the curious fate of a fellow Pekinese, albeit a canine. I permitted myself an inward chuckle.

But Shih was not an insensitive man and neither was I. I produced my small sandalwood case and selected a needle, gold rather than silver. Even though I would charge no fee, my friend deserved only the best.

Some Doctors of Acupuncture insist that mild colitis is treated at the precise juncture of clavicle and sternum. Not I. Inserting the gold needle just above the web of skin between the forefinger and the thumb, I gave Honorable Shih instant relief. And in ten minutes he was his old self.

"Your needle," he said with a grateful sigh. "Miraculous."

"Yes, yes. But Uncle's thumbprint was on the annuity check when it was cashed. Surely—"

"—he was already dead and could not have endorsed it. Precisely. He was already dead and buried among his ancestors. Minus one thumb."

I pursed my lips in thought, then nodded slowly. "Upon his death the annuity would cease. The severed thumb, then, was his legacy."

"Yes. the restaurant alone could not support his vast family."

"But the thumb? Where? How?"

"Elementary, my dear Wa Tze-na." But, eyeing me sidelong, he had slurred my name to give it the diminutive patronizing form, Wat-zen-a. "Like the pigs' esophagi you devour with such relish it was pickled."

Ignoring his jibe at my fondness for food, I closed my eyes for a moment to review what I knew. "Yes. Yes, of course. Simple, really. Although formaldehyde might have been better, might have

prevented that slight softening of the flesh that pickling produces. No matter—the thumbprint endorsements will continue to be readily identifiable.”

As he nodded agreement I studied his lean face. “And now, Shih Lok?”

“And now, nothing. I shall respect Uncle T’ou Kai’s wishes fully. His legacy, his thumb, shall go on faithfully serving his family just as he did. The Adventure of La Soupe Chinoise is, here and now, closed.”

No, by no means an insensitive man, my friend Honorable Shih Lok. I rose and crossed the small room to fetch the mou-t’ai. It was time for our customary nightcap.



CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
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THE JURY BOX

by **JOHN DICKSON CARR**

Long ago, as faithful readers are aware, your mentor learned to be philosophic about books for review. Inane cheerfulness is as bad as constant griping; let's avoid both. If I mayn't have items divided between detection and espionage, say two from each field for balance, let them touch as many aspects of sensationalism as possible.

And that's what has happened this time. Beginning with sound detection against a picturesque background, we go on to grand-scale crooks' progress from long ago, continue through sophisticated cloak-and-dagger, and end with situation mystery in which the cry of "What's going on here?" sings like a refrain. In short, there's a little of everything.

Throughout *Bored to Death*, by Michael Delving (Scribners, \$6.95), the only bore we encounter is the tidal rush of water so named from the River Severn, our setting for dirty work in a corner of rural England near which I once made my home.

Exploring the Gloucestershire countryside, Dave Cannon, American book-and-antique dealer with English wife, again meets trouble. Near the river he encounters a small silver-gilt casket, finely crafted mediaeval relic; in the river he encounters the murdered body of the casket's unsavory owner.

The theft of the silver-gilt casket—did it ever really belong to Beaver?—only complicates a problem already confused enough. Superintendent Whimbrel, suspicious of everybody, has reason for suspicion until Dave Cannon stumbles on truth. The local types are well observed, the atmosphere authentic, the crime ingenious and with clues in full view. A-plus for Michael Delving.

The title of Michael Crichton's *The Great Train Robbery* (Knopf, \$7.95) refers to a heist imagined as challenging Scotland Yard under Queen Victoria, 1855, when railways provided the newest, fastest travel.

What a scheme! Much gold for British troops in the Crimea, packed into two safes alleged burglar-proof on a train London-to-

© 1975 by John Dickson Carr.

Paris, is the target of suave, engaging, ruthless Edward Pierce, criminal genius, with allies both male-sinister and female-fetching. We watch not only through crooks' eyes but through the eyes of the original Metropolitan Police, who *almost* penetrate Pierce's plan before his ingenious trap for the train.

What happens then and afterward you must read for yourself; the author, no moralist, tells a rip-roaring story. Not least among this novel's charms is the care in research which gives us persuasive Victorian spirit as well as speech. I enjoyed the book immensely, and I think you will enjoy it too.

In *The Safe House*, by Jon Cleary (Morrow, \$7.75), much cloak-and-dagger play springs from an undercover game just after Hitler's War, with two very different teams lined up against fate. As one team we have Europe's displaced persons, many of them Jews trying to reach Palestine despite Britain, which will not yet encourage the new state of Israel. As another team we have Nazi war criminals, fleeing for sanctuary in South America.

Led by Luise Graz, beautiful Viennese singer with Catholic father and Jewish mother, our own small band of the displaced sets out for Italy *en route* to Israel, while American Major Dunleavy faithfully trails Luise. Also bound for Italy, among other Nazis, is the doctor who sent Luise's mother to the gas chamber. Nazis and refugees must collide at their mutual "safe" house, the villa of an Italian countess who will accommodate both sides or any side for a price.

Collide they do, with results not altogether predictable in a house anything but safe, before the bullet-torn climax and satisfactorily happy ending of this fine thriller for your list.

With Michael Innes' *The Mysterious Commission* (Dodd, Mead, \$5.95), the creator of Sir John Appleby momentarily deserts his retired detective for an adventure in the world of art.

We face no usual problem, despite all the mystery. Charles Honeybath, fashionable portrait painter, is offered a large fee if he will visit somebody's country house and do a portrait without learning where he is or whose picture he has been commissioned to paint.

It's a criminal stratagem; but, of course, what seems one sort of gambit is in fact something else. Honeybath himself develops talent as a sleuth, especially after meeting the girl from Imlac House, through exploits which show the author's customary skill, humor, and charm. You can always trust Michael Innes.

a **NEW** short story by

R. R. IRVINE

About an interesting character and one rarely found in fiction—a stringer, a freelance news cameraman who spent his nights roaming the streets of Los Angeles searching for DB's, for violent death, and hoping that one dark night he would stumble on a big story, an exclusive on film that would bring him fame and fortune . . .

IN THE DEAD HOURS

by **R. R. IRVINE**

Trakker had become a vampire. He didn't suck blood exactly—he filmed it.

But he did keep Transylvanian hours, rising at sunset to spend the night hunting the streets of Los Angeles seeking his lifeblood, tragedy. His battered pickup truck sported a maze of aerials connected to police-band radios, fire frequencies, and sheriff's short-wave. They allowed him to monitor the pulse of the city, a beat he'd been auditing for more than 20 years.

Shootings, freeway fender-benders, calamities of all kinds transfused him, but only to the point of bare subsistence. Yet like all stringer cameramen, he never gave up hope that someday his big story would come along and make him rich and famous.

Such a story would have to break between midnight and 6:00 A.M., the hours when the big TV stations all but closed down their newsrooms. Otherwise, why pay him when they could film it themselves?

So on each nightly run Trakker kept fingers crossed, praying that the stations' overnight men—hapless creatures sentenced to oblivion because they had incurred the wrath of management—were their usual vigilant selves. That is to say, by all odds they should be asleep. Hell, Trakker had been around the business long enough to know how things worked. Of course, it was no

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longer like the pioneering days of TV news, the 1950's, when anything went, when the tools of the trade were an old shoe, a white sheet, and a child's broken doll.

Trakker laughed at his memories. Scenes of tragedy danced in his head. Clearly, as if it had been only yesterday, he saw himself lying beneath his sheet, simulating a body, and yelling "Roll it!" to other members of the camera fraternity, who were invariably late at the scene of disaster. Re-creation had been easier and cheaper than installing reliable two-way radios.

He remembered the countless shoes dropped at the scenes of traffic accidents, as if to show that the victims had been hurled into eternity by the impact.

And the memory of his own special doll brought a grin to his face. It had been so poignant—its little dress torn, one arm completely ripped away. In closeup that doll had said everything there was to say about fatal childhood accidents. Besides, what was the harm in a little stage-managing?

But Trakker had no need for re-creation this day. He had a story that was all his own, his ticket to a bonus. He laughed out loud. There had been no skill involved. He'd been on his way home after a fruitless night when the DB (dead body) call came over the police band. DB's were seldom worth much, a few feet of film at most, but he'd been less than a mile from the location, so he said, "What the hell!"

He'd arrived just ahead of the first patrol car.

Now, whistling cheerfully, he drove toward Hollywood. Excitement surged in him the moment he pulled up before Channel Three's main gate.

Trakker leaned out of the pickup window to shout a greeting at the guard. But the sentry, decades beyond Trakker's 55, eyed the stringer sourly, without a flicker of recognition, though they'd been through the procedure countless times before. "What's your business?" the guard demanded truculently.

"Film for the newsroom," Trakker replied, as always.

"Who ya wanna see? I got to put a name down on my log."

"Wayne Gossett, the assignment editor."

"He don't get in till six."

"It's that right now," Trakker said.

Without so much as an acknowledging grunt the guard thumbed Trakker on his way. The stringer maneuvered his pickup into a no-parking area directly in front of the news building

and then, with a weary sigh, eased his potbelly out from under the steering wheel and lumbered inside to face Gossett.

The assignment editor, who looked like a mere kid to Trakker, 25 at the most, got busy on one of his phones when he saw the stringer coming. He usually did that; he liked to make stringers wait.

Trakker lit a cigarette and wheezed out a cloud of smoke. Assignment editors were all alike, he knew. They hadn't changed in all the years Trakker had been hawking film. They made each sale a tough fight.

"Hurry it up," Trakker grunted. "I've got a good one."

Gossett answered with a gesture and then made a show of turning his back on the stringer.

That would never have happened in the old days, the days before the big unions took over and made it almost impossible for a freelancer like himself to make a decent living. In those days he hadn't been limited to overnight pickups. Hell, no! Then he'd been in demand. Often as not he'd fill in for a regular staff cameraman and have his own soundman, a bond-servant attached by audio umbilical to follow his every whim.

Back in the 50's there was hardly anyone who'd ever heard of TV news, let alone knew the workings of a sixteen-millimeter camera. It had been a stringer's market. Reporters had called him by his first name, bought him lunches, laughed at his jokes; they never knew when their careers might depend on his film.

Trakker muttered a silent curse, condemning the unions and the slick, image-stricken medium that television had become.

Nowadays he barely earned enough to eat. Affording a wife was out of the question, so he lived alone. No one called him anything but Trakker, and then with derision. He was tolerated in newsrooms only because he covered tragedy in the dead hours of the night.

But he wanted more than toleration. He wanted his life back; he wanted to rejoin the daylight living.

Gossett came off the phone abruptly, pointed his sharp nose at the plexiglass assignment board behind his desk, and said, "I've got just about all the film I need for today."

Trakker saw only half a dozen stories grease-penciled on the glass. He knew it took at least twice that many to fill an hour of news. But all he said was, "You'll want what I've got this time."

"All stringers say that. What is it—another fender-bender?"

Trakker shook his head, grinning.

"Not another fire, I hope."

"No—a murder," said Trakker.

Gossett's eyes narrowed but that didn't hide their glint of expectation.

"Throat slashed from ear to ear, among other things," the stringer added.

Gossett jerked open a desk drawer and rummaged for a film purchase form. After filling in Trakker's name the assignment editor asked, "What else have you got?"

"Victim was male, late sixties. Found in an alley behind an all-night café on Main Street. He—"

"Main Street!" Gossett interrupted. "What the hell was he, a bum?"

"Wino."

The assignment editor swore profusely. "Nobody's going to miss one drunk more or less. Where's the human interest?"

"I'm the only one who got film of the body."

Pretending to be disinterested, Gossett shook his head. But Trakker knew better. All assignment editors lived for exclusive film.

"You sure?" Gossett asked finally.

"I was the only cameraman there and they were loading the body when I left. The coroner's probably working on him right now, so that lets out any more film."

"Okay. We'll process your stuff and take a look-see."

Trakker nodded. That was half of the battle. Once a TV station agreed to process a stringer's film, they were committed to replace it free with a fresh roll of sixteen millimeter, sale or no sale.

"How much?" Trakker asked.

"If we use it—the usual, seventy-five."

"It's exclusive. It ought to be worth a bonus."

"Seventy-five is pretty damn good for one night's work. It's more than I make."

"I'm lucky if I sell one film a week," Trakker answered.

Gossett shrugged. "A slashed throat means a lot of blood. We got to be careful what we put on the air during the dinner hour. We don't want our viewers losing their appetite."

"I was careful," Trakker said. "I shot around most of it."

"We'll see. I'll check with the fuzz right now." With a dramatic gesture Gossett punched on his desk speaker so that Trakker

could listen in. It was another of his techniques designed to squelch stringers, since cops made just about any story sound dull and boring.

But for once a detective was unusually talkative. "That Trakker's a bloodsucker. He beat us to the body. A regular ghoul." The policeman paused. "This sounds hollow. Are we on a speaker?"

"Yeah," Gossett admitted.

"Trakker's probably standing right there, huh?"

The assignment editor grunted.

"Tell him to watch it with his film. Our killer's a weirdo. Did some fancy carving on the body and we don't want the details getting out. Otherwise, the next thing you know we'll be up to our butts in copycat killers."

"We'll play it cool," Gossett promised. "Anything official you can tell me about the killing?"

"It's too early. No positive ID yet. We think the murder weapon was a straight razor, but you'll have to wait for the coroner's report before you can run anything on that."

Gossett hung up and turned to Trakker. "Since we can't use the fancy stuff, it's not worth more than seventy-five. No way."

"An exclusive should be worth something," the stringer complained. "It's not like the old days around here. Remember—remember the Kennedy story in Malibu?"

"Not that again!"

Trakker's eyes glazed over. "It was 1960, I think. Maybe '61. JFK was driving along the beach and suddenly decided to go wading in the surf. Only cameraman around was a stringer. He got a thousand bucks for that film."

"An accident," Gossett said. "A fluke. That will never happen again. The stations are bigger now, with a lot more film crews."

"No," Trakker protested, "a big story can still make a stringer."

Gossett laughed at him.

A week later a second derelict was found with his throat slashed. And again Trakker was the first on the scene. Channel Three paid him \$100 for the film.

The *Times*, which had run the first killing on the back page of the second section, moved the new murder to the first section with a headline that read; *The Cutthroat Strikes Again*. That made it official as far as TV was concerned. The Cutthroat was now big news.

Trakker had to share the third body with another stringer. "You can't win 'em all," he told Gossett. But even though the film wasn't exclusive, the assignment editor kicked in for \$150. Of course, the other channels were bidding too.

Trakker was now riding high. Competition didn't bother him. He'd been in the business too long. He began to haunt skidrow, living out of his pickup truck. He felt certain the next killing would be the magic number, the one to bring him a really big bonus, maybe even rivaling the JFK scoop. He felt it in his bones.

But then things started to go sour. The TV stations made a deal with the police—favorable coverage in return for calls to stand-by crews whenever the next murder occurred.

"After all," as Gossett told Trakker, "it isn't every day a maniac killer comes along. And you stringers aren't equipped to get us sound. We need sirens and interviews from bystanders to make these murders live."

"It's not fair."

Gossett laughed. "News is just like show business. You gotta keep coming up with better acts all the time or people will switch channels. You'd better go back to fender-benders, Trakker. You've lost your bargaining power."

You're no bargain yourself, Trakker thought, scowling at the assignment editor. But the unspoken back-talk did nothing for the stringer's peace of mind. Here he was, a 55-year-old freelance-playing reporter. A man his age ought to be planning retirement, not chasing after a paranoid killer.

"How about putting me on as backup?" Trakker asked deferentially. "You never know when you might have an equipment failure."

Wide-eyed, Gossett stared at the stringer. "You? Hell, Trakker, I can pull another crew in as backup if I want. But you? You aren't even in the union."

That's not the half of it, Trakker said to himself as he left the newsroom. He wasn't even covered by Social Security. Some old age he'd have. He'd be filming fender-benders until they carried him away.

Feeling exhausted, the stringer climbed into his pickup, his face drawn at the thought of the long daylight hours until it was time to patrol the night in search of tragedy once again. What was the use of going home? No one was buying freelance film. Something inside Trakker crumbled.

"I'm as much a bum as those winos," he muttered to himself. "Only I'm going to hell with a little more style." He viciously gunned the motor of the battered old pickup and headed for the skidrow district.

At 4:30 the next morning he called Gossett at home.

"How'd you get my number?" the assignment editor grumbled.

"Never mind that," Trakker said. "I need a decision—now."

"Has there been another one?"

"What would you pay for a double murder—two throats cut?"

"I have a crew on stand-by, you know that."

"A double murder, plus an exclusive interview with the killer?"

"I—an exclusive? You sure?"

"I want two thousand dollars," Trakker said. "Double the JFK money."

Gossett made a strangling noise.

"I can always try another channel."

"I can't make that kind of decision," Gossett mumbled. "I'll have to call management."

"You got five minutes, that's as long as I can wait."

"What's your number there?"

Trakker read off the numbers of the pay phone.

Four minutes later Gossett called back. "A thousand's as high as we can go."

"It's got to be more than that."

They argued until the assignment editor said finally, "Twelve hundred. And that's the absolute limit."

Trakker smiled. Twelve hundred would make him the highest paid stringer ever. He gave Gossett an address and then asked, "How soon can you get your crew there?"

"Fifteen minutes—no more."

"Done," Trakker said and hung up. He stepped out of the telephone booth, hurried back to the pickup, and opened the door so that he could read his watch by the overhead light while he smoked a cigarette.

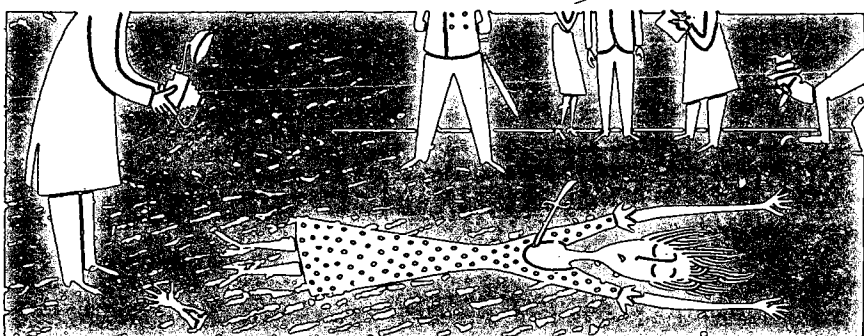
His head throbbed from lack of sleep and the after-effects of cheap wine. He locked the truck and trotted toward the Fifth Street Bridge. The two winos still lay in the shelter beneath the arch, right where he'd left them when they had passed out.

Trakker's heart pounded and he had trouble focusing on the two unconscious figures. "Just like me," he muttered. "Only I'm going to be remembered."

Already he felt the hot strobe lights of fame on his face. He wiped the sweat from his eyes so he'd look better for the battery of cameras that would be aimed at him. Only then did he realize that the Channel Three newswagon was in sight.

Not much time left, he thought. But enough. His laughter echoed under the bridge. What did it matter that he wasn't the original cutthroat? It would take the cops days, maybe weeks, to figure that one out. He knew all the tricks; he could really make it look good. Who would ever be able to say for sure that he was a copycat?

He stood poised for a moment as if searching for the best camera angle and then, straight razor in hand, he lunged forward. The two winos died quietly enough for the approaching newsmen to hear a single crisp command, "Roll it!"



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Once again Ellery is challenged by the other members of The Puzzle Club; but this "adventure in deduction" offers not only armchair detection in its "purest" sense but also "variations on a 'tec theme" . . . This is the first appearance of "The Odd Man" in EQMM . . .

THE ODD MAN

by ELLERY QUEEN

One of the unique encounters in the short and happy history of The Puzzle Club began, as so many interesting things do, in the most ordinary way.

That is to say, 7:30 of that Wednesday evening found Ellery in the foyer of Syres's Park Avenue penthouse aerie pressing the bell button, having the door opened for him by a butler who had obviously been inspired by Jeeves, and being conducted into the grand-scale wood-leather-and-brass-stud living room that had just as obviously been inspired by the king-sized ranchos of the Southwest where Syres had made his millions.

As usual Ellery found the membership assembled—with the exception, also as usual, of Arkavy, the biochemist whose Nobel achievement took him to so many international symposiums that Ellery had not yet laid eyes on him; indeed, he had come to think of the great scientist as yet another fiction his fellow members had dreamed up for mischievous reasons of their own. There was Syres himself, their hulking and profoundly respected host—respected not for being a multimillionaire but for having founded the club; tall sardonic Darnell of the John L. Lewis eyebrows, the criminal lawyer who was known to the American Bar, not altogether affectionately, as "the rich man's Clarence Darrow"; the psychiatrist, Dr. Vreeland, trim and peach-cheeked, whose professional reputation was as long as his stature was short; and wickedly blue-eyed little Emmy Wandermere, who had recently won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry to—for once—unanimous approval.

It was one of the strictest rules of The Puzzle Club that no extraneous matters, not of politics or art or economics or world af-

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fairs, or even of juicy gossip, be allowed to intrude on the business at hand, which was simply (in a manner of speaking only, since that adverb was not to be found in the club's motto) to challenge each member to solve a puzzle invented by the others, and then to repair to Charlot's dinner table, Charlot being Syres's chef, with a reputation as exalted in his field as that of the puzzlers in theirs. The puzzles were always in story form, told by the challengers seriatim, and they were as painstakingly planned for the battle of wits as if an empire depended on the outcome.

Tonight it was Ellery's turn again, and after the briefest of amenities he took his place in the arena, which at The Puzzle Club meant sitting down in a hugely comfortable leather chair near the superfireplace, with a bottle, a glass, and a little buffet of Charlot's masterly canapés at hand and no further preliminaries whatever.

Darnell began (by prearrangement—the sequence of narrators was as carefully choreographed as a ballet).

"The puzzle this evening, Queen, is right down your alley—"

"Kindly omit the courtroom-type psychology, Counselor," Ellery drawled, for he was feeling in extra-fine fettle this evening, "and get on with it."

"—because it's a cops-and-robbers story," the lawyer went on, unperturbed, "except that in this case the cop is an undercover agent whose assignment it is to track down a dope supplier. The supplier is running a big wholesale illicit-drug operation; hundreds of pushers are getting their stuff from him, so it's important to nail him."

"The trouble is," Dr. Vreeland said, feeling the knot of his tie (I wonder, Ellery thought, what his analyst made of that—it was one of the psychiatrist's most irritating habits), "his identity is not known precisely."

"By which I take it that it's known imprecisely," Ellery said. "The unknown of a known group."

"Yes, a group of three."

"The classic number."

"It's convenient, Queen."

"That's the chief reason it's classic."

"The three suspects," oilman Syres broke in, unable to conceal a frown, for Ellery did not always comport himself with the decorum the founder thought their labors deserved, "all live in the same building. It's a three-story house . . ."

"Someday," Ellery said, peering into the future, "instead of a three-story house I shall make up a three-house story."

"Mr. Queen!" and Emmy Wandermere let a giggle escape. "Please be serious, or you won't be allowed to eat Charlot's chef-d'oeuvre, which I understand is positively wild tonight."

"I've lost track," Syres grumped. "Where were we?"

"I beg everyone's pardon," Ellery said. "We have an undercover police officer who's turned up three suspects, one of whom is the dope wholesaler, and all three live in a three-story house, I presume one to a floor. And these habitants are?"

"The man who occupies the ground floor," the little poet replied, "and whose name is John A. Chandler—known in the neighborhood as Jac, from his initials—runs a modest one-man business, a radio-and-TV-repair shop, from his apartment."

"The question is, of course," Lawyer Darnell said, "whether the repair shop is just a front for the dope-supply operation."

Ellery nodded. "And the occupant of the middle floor?"

"An insurance agent," Dr. Vreeland said. "Character named Cutcliffe Kerry—"

"Named what?"

"Cutcliffe Kerry is what we decided on," the psychiatrist said firmly, "and if you don't care for it that's your problem, Queen, because Cutcliffe Kerry he remains."

"Very well," Ellery said. "but I think I detect the aroma of fresh herring. Or am I being double-whammied? In any event, Cutcliffe Kerry sells insurance, or tries to, which means he gets to see a great many people. So the insurance thing could be a cover. And the top floor?"

"Is rented by a fellow named Fletcher, Benjamin Fletcher," Syres said. "Fletcher is a salesman, too, but of an entirely different sort. He sells vacuum cleaners."

"Door to door," Ellery said. "Possible cover too. All right, Jac Chandler, radio-TV repairman; Cutcliffe Kerry, insurance agent; Ben Fletcher, vacuum-cleaner salesman; and one of them is the bad guy. What happens, Mr. Syres?"

"The undercover man has been watching the building and— isn't the word tailing?—the three men, according to his reports to his superior at police headquarters."

"And just after he finds out who the drug supplier is," Darnell said mournfully, "but before he can come up with the hard evidence, he's murdered."

"As I suspected," Ellery said, shaking his head. "Earning the poor fellow a departmental citation and the traditional six feet of sod. He was murdered by the dope boy, of course."

"Of course."

"To shut him up."

"What else?"

"Which means he hadn't yet reported the name of the dope supplier."

"Well, not exactly, Mr. Queen." Emmy Wandermere leaned forward to accept the flame of Dr. Vreeland's gold lighter, then leaned back puffing like The Little Engine That Could on a steep grade. She was trying to curb her nicotine-and-tar intake, so she was currently smoking cigarettes made of processed lettuce. "The undercover man hadn't reported the drug supplier's name, true, but in the very last report before his murder he did mention a clue."

"What kind of clue?"

"He referred to the supplier—his subsequent killer—as, and this is an exact quote, Mr. Queen, 'the odd man of the three.'"

Ellery blinked

"Your mission, Mr. Queen, if you accept it—and you'd better, or be kicked out of the club," said Darnell in his most doom-ridden courtroom tones, "is to detect the guilty man among Chandler, Kerry, and Fletcher—the one of them who's been selling the stuff in wholesale lots and who murdered our brave lad of the law."

"The odd man of the three, hm?"

Ellery sat arranging his thoughts. As at all such critical stages of the game, by protocol, the strictest silence was maintained.

Finally Ellery said, "Where and how did the murder of the undercover agent take place?"

Darnell waved his manicured hand. "Frankly, Queen, we debated whether to make up a complicated background for the crime. In the end we decided it wouldn't be fair, because the murder itself has nothing to do with the puzzle except that it took place. The details are irrelevant and immaterial."

"Except, of course, to the victim, but that's usually left out." Having discharged himself of this philosophical gripe, Ellery resumed his seat, as it were, on his train of thought. "I suppose the premises were searched from roof to cellar, inside and out, by the police after the murder of their buddy?"

"You know it," Syres said.

"I suppose, too, that no narcotics, amphetamines, barbituates, et cetera *ad nauseam*, no cutting equipment, no dope paraphernalia of any kind, were found anywhere in the building?"

"Not a trace," Dr. Vreeland said. "The guilty man disposed of it all before the police got there."

"Did one of the men have a record?"

Miss Wandermere smiled. "*Nyet.*"

"Was one of them a married man and were the other two bachelors?"

"No."

"Was it the other way round? One of them a bachelor and two married?"

"I admire the way you wriggle, Mr. Queen. The answer is still no."

"The odd man of the three." Ellery mused again. "Well, I see we'll have to be lexical. By the commonest definition, odd means strange, unusual, peculiar. Was there anything strange, unusual, or peculiar in, say, the appearance of Chandler or Kerry or Fletcher?"

Dr. Vreeland, with relish: "Not a thing."

"In a mannerism? Behavior? Speech? Gait? That sort of thing?"

Syres: "All ordinary as hell, Queen."

"In background?"

Darnell, through a grin: "Ditto."

"There was nothing bizarre or freakish about one of them?"

"Nothing, friend," Emmy Wandermere murmured.

Ellery grasped his nose more like an enemy.

"Was one of them touched in the head?" he asked suddenly. "Odd in the mental sense?"

"There," the psychiatrist said, "you tread on muddy ground, Queen. Any antisocial behavior, as in the case of habitual criminals, might of course be so characterized. However, for purposes of our story the answer is no. All three men were normal—whatever that means."

Ellery nodded fretfully. "I could go on and on naming categories of peculiarity, but let me save us all from endangering Charlot's peace of mind. *Did* the undercover man use the word odd to con-note peculiar?"

The little poet looked around and received assents invisible to the Queen eye. "He did not."

"Then that's that. Oh, one thing. Was the report in which he

fingered the supplier as being the odd man written or oral?"

"Now what kind of question is that?" the oil king demanded. "What could that have to do with anything?"

"Possibly a great deal, Mr. Syres. If it had been an oral report, there would be no way of knowing whether his word odd began with a capital O or a small o. Assume that he'd meant it to be capital O-d-d. Then Odd man might have referred to a member of the I.O.O.F., the fraternal order—the Odd Fellows. That might certainly distinguish your man from the other two."

"It was a written report," Darnell said hastily, "and the o of odd was a small letter."

Everyone looked relieved. It was evident that the makers of this particular puzzle had failed to consider the Independent Order of Odd Fellows in their scheming.

"There are other odd possibilities—if you'll forgive the pun—such as odd in the golf meaning, which is one stroke more than your opponent has played. But I won't waste any more time on esoterica. Your undercover man meant odd in the sense of not matching, didn't he? Of being left over?"

"Explain that, please," Dr. Vreeland said.

"In the sense that two of the three suspects had something in common, something the third man didn't share with them—thus making the third man 'the odd man' and consequently the dope supplier and murderer. Isn't that the kind of thing your undercover agent meant by odd man?"

The psychiatrist looked cautious. "I think we may fairly say yes to that."

"Thank you very much," Ellery said. "Which brings me to a fascinating question: How clever are you people being? Run-of-the-game clever or clever-clever?"

"I don't think," Miss Wandermere said, "we quite follow. What do you mean exactly, Mr. Queen?"

"Did you intend to give me a choice of solutions? The reason I ask is that I see not one possible answer, but three."

"Three!" Syres shook his massive head. "We had enough trouble deciding on one."

"I for one," Counselor Darnell stated stiffly, "should like to hear a for-instance."

"All right, I'll give you one solution I doubt you had in mind, since it's so obvious."

"You know, Queen, you have a sadistic streak in you?" barked

Dr. Vreeland. "Obvious! Which solution is obvious?"

"Why, Doctor. Take the names of two of your suspects, John A.—Jac—Chandler and Benjamin Fletcher. Oddly enough—there I go again!—those surnames have two points of similarity. 'Chandler' and 'Fletcher' both end in 'er' and both contain eight letters. Cutcliffe Kerry's surname differs in both respects—no 'er' ending and only five letters—so Kerry becomes the odd surname of the trio. In this solution, then, Kerry the insurance man is the supplier-killer."

"I'll be damned," Syres exclaimed. How did we miss that?"

"Very simply," Miss Wandermere said. "We didn't see it."

"Never mind that," Darnell snapped. "The fact is it happened. Queen, you said you have three solutions. What's another?"

"Give me a clue to the solution you people had in mind, since there are more than one. Some key word that indicates the drift but doesn't give the game away. One word can do it."

Syres, Darnell, and Dr. Vreeland jumped up and surrounded Emmy Wandermere. From the looped figures, the cocked heads, and the murderous whispers they might have been the losing team in an offensive huddle with six seconds left to play. Finally, the men resumed their seats, nudging one another.

Said little Miss Wandermere: "You asked for a clue, Mr. Queen. The clue is: clue."

Ellery threw his head back and roared. "Right! Very clever, considering who I am and that I'm the solver of the evening.

"You hurled my specialized knowledge in my teeth, calculating that I'd be so close to it I wouldn't see it. Sorry! Two of the surnames you invented," Ellery said with satisfaction, "are of famous detective-story writers. Chandler—in this case Raymond Chandler—was the widely acclaimed creator of Philip Marlowe. Joseph Smith Fletcher—J. S. Fletcher—produced more detective fiction than any other writer except Edgar Wallace, or so it's said; Fletcher's *The Middle Temple Murder* was publicly praised by no lesser mystery fan than the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson. On the other hand, if there's ever been a famous detective-story writer named Cutcliffe Kerry, his fame has failed to reach me. So your Mr. Kerry again becomes the odd man of the trio and the answer to the problem. Wasn't that your solution, Miss Wandermere and gentlemen?"

They said yes in varying tones of chagrin.

Ordinarily, at this point in the evening's proceedings, the com-

pany would have risen from their chairs and made for Syres's magnificently gussied-up cookhouse of a dining room. But tonight no one stirred a toe, not even at the promise of the manna simmering on Charlot's hob. Instead, Dr. Vreeland uttered a small, inquiring cough.

"You, ah, mentioned a third solution, Queen. Although I must confess—"

"Before you pronounce your *mea culpa*, Doctor," Ellery said with a smile, "may I? I've given you people your solution. I've even thrown in another for good measure. Turnabout? I now challenge you. What's the third solution?" . . .

Ten minutes later Ellery showed them mercy—really, he said sorrowfully, more in the interest of preserving Charlot's chancy good will than out of natural goodness of heart.

"John A. Chandler, Cutcliffe Kerry, Benjamin Fletcher. Chandler, Kerry, and Fletcher. What do two of these have in common besides what's already been discussed? Why, they derive from trades or occupations."

"Chandler." The lawyer, Darnell, looked around at the others, startled. "You know, that's true!"

"Yes, a ship chandler deals in specified goods or equipment. If you go farther back in time you find that a chandler was someone who made or sold candles or, as in very early England, supervised the candle requirements of a household. So that's one trade.

"Is there another in the remaining two surnames?"

"Yes, the name Fletcher. A fletcher was—and technically still is—a maker of arrows, or a dealer in same; in the Middle Ages, by extension, although this was a rare meaning, the word was sometimes used to denote an archer. In either event, another trade or occupation.

"But the only etymological origin I've ever heard ascribed to the name Kerry is County Kerry, from which the Kerry blue terrier derives. And that's not a trade, it's a place. So with the names Chandler and Fletcher going back to occupations, and Kerry to Irish geography, your Mr. Kerry becomes once again the unpaired meaning, the odd man—a third answer to your problem."

And Ellery rose and offered his arm gallantly to Miss Wandermere.

The poetess took it with a little shake. And as they led the way to the feast she whispered, "You know what you are, Ellery Queen? You're an intellectual *pack rat*!"

**a NEW Inspector Appleby story by
MICHAEL INNES**

first publication in the United States

As Sergeant Aggett remarked, being a psychiatrist is "a dangerous job." He knows too many secrets to be safe, and he's in "constant contact with thoroughly unbalanced types." Even so, Inspector Appleby's investigation of the murdered psychiatrist led to a very strange story indeed—"It will be a great literary sensation," Appleby was sure . . .

THE SECRET IN THE WOODPILE

by MICHAEL INNES

Charles Lenton was the dead man's name. He had been a psychiatrist. Inspector John Appleby, viewing what was left of him, unemotionally remarked to Sergeant Aggett that one must expect such chaps to get themselves murdered from time to time.

"Well, yes," Aggett said dubiously. "I suppose you might say, sir, that it's a dangerous job. Constant contact with thoroughly unbalanced types."

"And constant listening to shocking secrets. One might want to rub out somebody in whom one had rashly confided."

"I suppose so." Aggett seemed not particularly impressed. "But that would go for priests as well—the papist ones who hear confessions, that is. And not many priests are murdered."

"Priests don't keep notes. Psychiatrists do. Then one day they give you a fancy name, drape your affairs in a few other perfunctory fictions, and publish your embarrassing past as a case history."

"Not many notes surviving here, sir."

"That's true." Appleby glanced from Lenton's corpse to the wider scene. "And that's our starting point."

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One could still see that the spacious consulting room had been handsomely furnished. It was in London's most exclusive medical district. Lenton's practice must have been in a highly lucrative bracket. But the murderer had set the whole place afire in a thoroughly efficient way.

Apart from the body—on which not a stitch remained unconsumed—only ashes, charred wood, and here and there a fragment of curtain or carpet were on view. It was surprising that the building had been saved. But from this floor downward it was as drenched in water as if it had been under the sea.

"It was all antiques, the secretary says," Aggett announced with distaste. "French stuff with fancy names—*armoires*, and the like. A queer way to keep medical records."

"Not much security, certainly. One would expect steel filing cabinets. But I suppose they'd have struck too utilitarian a note."

"That's it, sir. Not that what you might call confidentiality wasn't well guarded in a way. No names, no pack drill. The case histories were all coded, it seems, as far as proper names went, and Lenton carried round a notebook with the key to it always on his own person. But there isn't anything of that left, as you can see. What I'm wondering is why, if there were no names in the files, the killer thought it necessary to burn down the whole works."

"Suppose, Aggett, the criminal is somebody well-known. And suppose some state of affairs he had once confided to Lenton had striking or even bizarre features which might point to him—names or no names. That would answer your point."

"Yes, sir. But there's another thing. A setup like this is deserted at night. The whole building consists of surgeries or consulting rooms or the like, and everybody packs up and goes home. It wouldn't have been too difficult simply to break in and remove or destroy the files. Instead of which the fellow marches in in broad daylight and does this. He was frightened not only of what was in the closets but of what was in Dr. Lenton's head as well."

"There isn't much left in it now. Until the fire got them, the brains must have been mostly on the carpet." Inspector Appleby glanced at the dead man again with composure. So did Sergeant Aggett. They were accustomed to what a heavy revolver can accomplish at close range. "But it's only one possibility, you know, that the chap wanted to destroy incriminating material. He may simply have wanted to possess himself of it—say, for purposes of

blackmail. Quite speculatively, it may have been. Then Lenton turned up and surprised him, and the rest followed. By the way, have you gathered anything yet about the nature of Lenton's practice? It might be relevant."

"Only what his secretary says and that was not much more than a string of long words. So I told her to write them down in my notebook. And here it is." Aggett, a most competent officer, produced this record from his pocket and read with care. "Dr. Lenton's methods were empirical and eclectic. Deep analysis, simple but sustained psychotherapy, prolonged narcosis, medical hypnotism, ECT, insulin shock, psychotropic drugs, abreactive techniques—"

"All right, Aggett. We'll just say he wouldn't readily acknowledge himself as baffled."

Appleby didn't find out much more about Charles Lenton that day, or indeed for many days to come. There was nothing shady about the doctor. High medical authority vouched for that. Not only was he among that minority of murdered persons who prove to be without dubious associations of one sort or another, he was a man distinguished, among other things, for his insistence on the highest standards of professional conduct. That might of course, as Aggett pointed out, be "all my eye." But somehow Appleby didn't think so.

Any other lead being lacking, it was necessary to inquire about the dead man's current patients. This was a delicate business. The troubles that lead people to seek psychiatric treatment are very often such as few would care to divulge even to the most sympathetic policeman. Not that Appleby was after that exactly. He could do little more than ask these people about Lenton and their impressions of him, rather than about themselves—this while forming his own opinion of them.

And he could be by no means quite certain he had all these sufferers on parade. Lenton's secretary, Miss Nicholson, seemed a capable young woman, and was confident she had produced a complete list out of her head. Her memory, however, went back no more than a couple of years, and this was true of another form of record which turned up in Lenton's home.

The doctor had kept a duplicate engagement book there, scrapping it more or less year by year. But the last two of these diaries were available, and Appleby studied them closely. They confirmed

that the secretary's recollection was reliable—except that here and there a name cropped up that meant nothing to her. These names—there were no more than four or five of them—were distinguished by a small pencil mark.

Appleby conjectured that they were the names of patients whom Lenton had seen, for one reason or another, only privately and at home. And Lenton's housekeeper—he had been an unmarried man—confirmed that this appeared to have happened from time to time.

There was nothing heartening in all this. What can one do with a few surnames scribbled in a diary? Very little—except look them up in the London telephone directory, and find each reproduced by the score or the hundred. But Appleby, having drawn a complete blank with Lenton's known patients, was reduced to just that.

Only one name wasn't hopelessly common. It was Woodpile, and that wasn't common at all. There was only one Woodpile, and he turned out to be a university professor. Appleby resolved to have a go at him.

He found Professor Woodpile at work—an untidy man in an untidy room with a view of the British Museum through the window. And Appleby wasted no time.

"Professor Woodpile, you may have read that a certain Dr. Charles Lenton was recently discovered shot dead in his consulting room. I have called to ask if you were acquainted with him."

"Lenton? Charles Lenton?" It was evident that Woodpile was a highly nervous man. "Never set eyes on him."

"I must tell you, Professor, that your name has been found in his current engagement book—apparently as one with whom he had an appointment at his home. You would appear to be the only person in London named Woodpile. I wonder if I may invite you to comment on the circumstance?"

"My cousin. My Canadian cousin." Woodpile gulped violently. "Turned up out of the blue. Never knew I had one. But here he was—in London, and down with some nervous trouble. He wanted me to recommend somebody who might help him. I knew Lenton's name. Had heard he was a very distinguished and well-reputed psychiatrist. So I told my cousin—"

"What's his other name?"

"His other name?" The learned Woodpile appeared completely at sea.

"This cousin's Christian name."

"Oh, that! Arthur. I think it was Arthur."

"Thank you. Please go on."

"But that's all! I gave my cousin Lenton's name, and he went away. Never saw him again. Nor heard from him either."

"Have you any means of tracing this Arthur Woodpile, this wandering Canadian in search of medical aid?"

"Oh, none whatever. Out of the blue, as I said. And back into it again."

"Professor Woodpile, am I right in thinking that your subject is English Literature?"

"Perfectly right. Everybody knows that. Or everybody in my field."

"Quite so. And it is a field concerned with the deliverances of the imagination?"

"I don't understand you. I don't understand you at all."

"I rather think you do, sir. And I need hardly emphasize that this is a very serious matter. In the light of that would you care to reconsider your statement?"

"Certainly not."

"There is nothing further you wish to say?"

"Yes, there is. Go away and leave me alone."

This had been a most encouraging interview. Hitherto—at least to Appleby's practised ear—everybody had told the truth. Even those patients of Lenton's who had been obliged to touch or skirt matters of some embarrassment to themselves, even they had faced up to the gravity of the issue. Woodpile, on the other hand, for reasons still known only to himself, had improvised an absurd fiction. Why had he gone to see the dead man? And why did he want to conceal that he had done so?

There might be some perfectly innocent reason for each of these actions. Woodpile had perhaps consulted Lenton in a normal way—yet abnormally in the sense that he had been in a very unstable state. As a consequence of this he had perhaps quarreled violently with his prospective physician, and even made a nuisance of himself on subsequent occasions. And he might now simply be in a panic because of Lenton's violent end.

The perturbed Woodpile was worth following up. Appleby called on an acquaintance named Howard Collins, also a Professor of Literature.

"What's Woodpile's chief line?" he asked.

"He has only one. He's one of those single-subject scholars who get their teeth into a chap and keep them there for life."

"I see. Who's his chap?"

"The poet Richard Furey."

"Surely he's still alive?"

"He is indeed—and immensely old and eminent. Woodpile's two main books are called *Furey: the Poet* and *Furey: the Man*. Perhaps he'll end up with *Furey: the Corpse*. Furey's said to be pretty far gone."

"Physically, do you mean, or mentally?"

"Chiefly the latter, I believe. He's said to be enormously irascible and egotistical. A Grand Old Man of Letters, and so forth."

"Have you any notion how he gets on with Woodpile—this pertinacious critic and biographer? I imagine a great writer might be irritated or even infuriated by a learned hanger-on of that sort."

"I rather think it's not like that." Professor Collins had shaken his head decisively. "Woodpile has really done quite a lot for Furey's reputation. He discovered the early poems, you know. You must remember about that, Appleby."

"I'm afraid I don't. But how can one be said to discover the early work of a poet still living? I'd imagine the poet would do that for himself, if he had a mind to."

"You have a point there. And it's more accurate to say that Woodpile discovered in manuscript both some very early poems that had never been published and some well-known poems in early versions. Surprisingly early, indeed, in Furey's career."

"Furey was precocious?"

"That's precisely what Woodpile revealed—that Furey was far more of a prodigy than, say, Chatterton or Rimbaud. If he had been a musician it wouldn't have been that remarkable. The infant Mozart, and all that. But poets don't get powerfully going in their nurseries. Alexander Pope liked to claim that he lisped in numbers. But Pope fudged the evidence. Isn't this a bit far from your murdered psychiatrist, my dear Appleby?"

"It does sound that way. Do you think Furey would ever have had occasion to consult a mad doctor? That's what the early mental specialists were called. It's a finely ambiguous expression."

"No doubt. But how should I know? All poets are dotty, of course. Possessed by the Muse, or by the divine *furor*, or what have you. But Woodpile's biography records no visits in the

neighborhood of Harley Street. But then it wouldn't, would it? It's what they call an official or authorized biography."

Collins paused, then went on, "Would you care to borrow Woodpile's edition of that early stuff? I've got it here in my room somewhere. Very handsomely got up. Facsimilies of manuscripts, portraits of the young genius from the family photograph album, and so forth and so on."

"It scarcely sounds like one of the documents in the case. But I want to tackle the aged Richard Furey, and a spot of homework might be in order. I'd gain merit—don't you think?—if I showed knowledge of the chap's inspired infancy. So I'll accept your very obliging offer."

"Well, John," Judith Appleby asked her husband at their dinner table several days later, "did you gain admittance to the great man?"

"Yes, I did. And it's all over."

"All over?"

"Decidedly so." Appleby, who would have had to be described as looking mildly shaken, poured claret. "I have to ask myself if I mishandled the thing. The Director of Public Prosecutions may ask me that. Or even the Home Secretary himself."

"Nonsense, John!"

"Well, at least the mystery of Dr. Charles Lenton's death is a mystery no longer. But, you see, I presented myself to the aged poet in the character of an admirer. I'd got a tip that he quite liked that. I'd done my prep, as you know, but my pose was a shade rash, all the same. It made it very difficult to get on to the theme of Lenton, as you can imagine.

"Furey proved to be a powerful man still—physically powerful, I mean—but as crazy as they come. A senile craziness. He went off like a gun about himself and held forth for half an hour by my watch. All about his dazzling precocity. I was prepared for that a little by what Howard Collins had told me. But not for its being an obsessional theme.

"The awful thing is that Furey's poetry is poetry, and much of it major poetry at that. His reputation is as secure as a reputation in literature can ever be. But all that he had in his head was this lisping-in-numbers stuff—as discovered and celebrated by the tedious Woodpile."

Appleby paused, poured more claret, then paraphrased an old

saying. "But there was a secret in the Woodpile. It's been as simple as that."

"John, I know you're tired. But do talk sense."

"Very well. Have you ever seen a stage hypnotist at work?"

"Yes, I have. But what—"

"Describe some of the things you saw him do."

"He'd hypnotize a man from the audience, lay him out flat on three chairs, and then remove the middle one. The man would stay completely rigid, like a girder or tree trunk, supported only by his head and his heels."

"Yes, I've seen that too. Anything else?"

"He'd stick pins in people, and they wouldn't—"

"Yes, yes. More, please."

"He'd tell somebody he was a duck or a hippopotamus, and then—"

"That as well. Anything with a blackboard?"

"A blackboard? I don't think—but yes—"

"That was it, Judith. That was the whole thing. But, before I come to it, I'll tell you about the end of Furey."

"The end of Furey?"

"Just that. He's dead. You see, I got on to Lenton, that skilled medical hypnotist, and I went at Lenton hard. Eventually Furey saw that I *knew*. He sprang up, and I thought he was going to murder me. In fact, he *was* going to murder me. Only he had some frightful seizure instead and dropped dead on the instant. I suppose it gives me my niche in English literary history. But it's uncommonly awkward."

And Appleby smiled rather wanly. "To the best of my recollection, Judith, it's something that never happened to me before."

"Years ago"—Appleby had left the table and was composing himself with a cigar—"years ago Furey presented himself to Lenton, professing himself very interested in certain of the phenomena of hypnotism, and proposing a series of experiments—experiments in the composition of poetry. Now, Judith, go back to that blackboard. Your stage hypnotist gets his subject to sign his name. He then tells him he is fifteen years old and gives the same instruction. Up goes the signature in a fifteen-year-old hand. Eventually he gets back to a point at which his subject is struggling with his ABC's."

"Furey suggested his operating, as it were, at about the age of

twelve. He provided Lenton simply with a number of titles. Lenton would give the command, 'Compose a poem called So-and-so,' and off Furey would go. But since what he had in his head were mature poems—some published and some unpublished—with these same titles, precisely that was what he wrote out in the hypnotic state. Lenton may well have had a notion of what was going on, but saw it merely in terms of psychological curiosity. He hadn't a clue that any fraud was in the course of preparation."

"John, you don't mean—"

"Of course I do. Furey got away with a substantial little collection of his own adult work in a hand absolutely verifiable as that of his twelfth or thirteenth year. There would be plenty of his schoolboy letters and so forth to validate the handwriting. And then, to cut a long story short, he contrived to plant this material where the industriously researching Woodpile would be sure to happen on it. And thus did the celebrated Richard Furey juvenilia come into being. Its publication had the incidental result of making Woodpile's reputation."

"And then?"

"The late Dr. Lenton was no sort of literary character, and it was years before the penny, you may say, dropped in his head. But he did at length hear of Furey's fame as a uniquely precocious poetic genius. He got hold of a copy of the book I borrowed from Collins, embellished in facsimile with the actual writings which had been produced under his hypnotic nose—but with never a word in the book about the circumstances of their production. He wasn't a fool; he thought the thing out; and he realized that he had been an innocent party in a monstrous deception. The celebrated Alexander Pope had never fudged evidence in just that way."

"And he determined to expose the racket?"

"Just that. He'd been badly used, duped, but he was a man of complete integrity, and he wasn't standing for it. He informed Furey that he intended to expose the entire deception. By this time Furey's whole ego was bound up with his spurious reputation as a prodigy. In a panic, I imagine, he sent for Woodpile and owned up.

"Woodpile panicked too, feeling that when the truth became known his own reputation as a competent and respectable scholar would be in ruins. He went to see Lenton at his home, pleaded with him to keep silent, may have tried to bribe him as well. It

was no go. The outraged Lenton was adamant.

"Woodpile reported back to Furey, and Furey acted. He had to destroy Lenton's files. His name wouldn't be in them, but the facts would be plain to read, and could point only to himself. And he had to destroy Lenton too. He was a powerful old maniac, as I said. And he achieved the slaughter."

"John, how do you know all this?"

"I've had it out of the wretched Woodpile. He was in a terrible funk."

"Is he in danger from the law?"

"Probably not. He was no party to the original deception—even if it was a crime, and conceivably it was not. He was simply fooled as Lenton was. Of course, if he did try to buy Lenton's silence, that might be another matter. But it's something which, in the nature of the case, we shall never know."

"But it must all come out at the inquest on Lenton's death?"

"Most certainly. It will be a great literary sensation."

"And Woodpile will be sunk, so far as his reputation goes?"

"Quite possibly not. They're a strange crowd, scholars of that sort. Perhaps he'll write a book called *An Inquiry into Certain Twentieth Century Poetic Forgeries*—something of that kind—and triumphantly rehabilitate himself."

"Q"

NEXT MONTH...

9 NEW stories — including

EDWARD D. HOCH (*about Nick Velvet*)

HUGH PENTECOST (*about John Jericho*)

LAWRENCE TREAT (*a police procedural*)

JACOB HAY (*about an euthanasian*)

S. S. RAFFERTY (*Captain Cork in New Jersey*)

and two distinguished reprints by

AGATHA CHRISTIE (*about a cry for help*)

ROBERT L. FISH (*about a safecracker*)

a NEW Rand story by
EDWARD D. HOCH

This newest adventure-in-detection of Rand, head of the Department of Concealed Communications and known as the Double-C man, is one of the best in this fascinating series; perhaps it is the best—so far (which more than hints how much faith we have in Mr. Hoch's ability to keep topping himself) . . .

In the classical historical sense there are three peerless short-story riddles. The first, in chronological order, is Mark Twain's "Awful, Terrible Medieval Romance" (1871), and to the best of our knowledge neither Twain nor any other author ever wrote a solution or sequel to that riddle.

The second is that dazzling tour de force, Frank R. Stockton's "The Lady, or the Tiger?" (1884); but the author's own "continuation" ended in an equally impossible situation, and proved not to be a popular sequel. However, Jack Moffitt, in his "The Lady and the Tiger" (EQMM, September 1948), not only revealed who came out of the open door but did his unriddling so convincingly that, so far as we remember, there has not been a single dissenting vote from readers all these years.

The third great riddle story is Cleveland Moffett's "The Mysterious Card" (1896). Like Stockton, Moffett attempted his own explanation-sequel, called "The Mysterious Card Unveiled"; but his solution to the baffling legend-in-its-own-time never won the approval of readers.

All this is prefatory comment to Edward D. Hoch's newest Rand story, "The Spy and the Mysterious Card," in which Mr. Hoch gives us a contemporary answer to Moffett's timeless and irresistible tale. Not as brilliant as the Moffett solution to Stockton, the Hoch answer to Moffett is ingenious and satisfying—no mean feat of fiction so long (79 years!) after the first appearance of "The Mysterious Card" . . .

THE SPY AND THE MYSTERIOUS CARD

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Gemma Malone was the sort of young woman Rand would have noticed anywhere—tall and slim and very beautiful, with dark hair and high cheekbones that gave her face a kind of regal loveliness.

"You've grown up," Rand said, stating the obvious as he showed her to the most comfortable chair in his little office overlooking the Thames.

"It's just that you haven't seen me in so long—not since Daddy died."

"That's true," Rand admitted. He'd been out to their house frequently in the days when Sam Malone was still the top sports writer on London's best evening newspaper. But Sam had died of a heart attack in his mid-forties, leaving Gemma and her mother alone. Through thoughtlessness rather than design, Rand had seen little of them in the nine years since his death.

He reached for a pen in his inner pocket and pricked his finger once more on the straight pin that held the lining in place. It reminded him that he must get the suit to a tailor, and reminded him also that he was a bachelor, with no one to do such minor sewing chores for him. Perhaps it was his bachelorhood that had kept him from growing too friendly with Malone's widow. Whatever the cause, the friendship had dwindled now to a mere exchange of Christmas cards. It was a sense of guilt more than anything else that had made him eager to listen to Gemma's current problem. "How's your mother?" he asked.

"She's well, thanks. Back working for an ad agency in Liverpool."

"So you're on your own?"

She smiled at that. "I'm twenty-two years old, Mr. Rand. A university graduate and a career girl of sorts."

"Oh? What career?"

"Modeling. It helped pay the bills in college, and I've kept it up. I was in Paris on assignment when this thing happened to me."

"Tell me about it. I'll try to help if I can."

© 1975 by Edward D. Hoch.

"Mother said you're an expert on concealed communications. She told me on the phone that you could help if anyone could. And I've always turned to older men with my problems."

Rand felt suddenly ancient. "Do you have the card you mentioned on the phone?"

"It's back in my suitcase. I came right here from the phone booth, before you changed your mind." She tossed her head back and began. "But I can tell you about it. I was in Paris two days ago. I'd finished a photo assignment sooner than expected and I was killing time at the table of a sidewalk café near the photographer's studio. I was sipping a glass of wine when this man approached me.

"I'd never seen him before, but he acted as if he knew me. He smiled and held out a card for me to take. I glanced at it and saw some sort of message written in ink. It seemed to be French, though I know so little of the language I couldn't be certain. Before I could say anything he was gone."

"Perhaps he was collecting money for some charity," Rand speculated.

"Well, I thought of that too. I put the card in my purse and finished my drink. In fact, I might have forgotten about it completely except that when I returned to my hotel I heard a woman at the manager's desk, asking him to translate a letter. I waited until she left and showed him the card."

Rand noticed the lines of tension appear on her face, as if she was reliving some unpleasant experience. "What did it say?" he asked.

"That's just it! I don't know! The manager looked at it and wouldn't tell me. In fact, he told me I must leave the hotel that very night. I protested, but he would not discuss it. I had to be out, gone—and so I packed my bag and went."

"Extraordinary!"

"That's not the half of it. I took a taxi to another of the small hotels along the Seine, not far away, and rented a room for the night. My flight back to London was the following afternoon, so I wasn't too concerned. But in the morning, while having breakfast, I saw a distinguished white-haired man who was obviously the proprietor. As something of a lark I introduced myself and told the story of what had happened at the first hotel.

"He couldn't believe such a thing was possible and asked to see this mysterious card. When I showed it to him, his reaction was

almost the same as the first man's! He not only refused to tell me what it said, but he told me I could not remain at his hotel. It didn't bother me much, since I'd planned to return to London that day anyhow, but by this time my curiosity had reached its limit. I simply had to know what that card said."

"Whom did you try next?" Rand asked. The entire situation was like something out of a book he'd read long ago.

"I went to the photographer for whom I'd modeled the previous day. His studio is in the same neighborhood, and he's a kindly old fellow who's always been friendly to me. Sort of an uncle. I told him my story and he couldn't believe it. Then I showed him the card—"

"Yes?" he prompted.

"He looked at it and quickly handed it back. He seemed very upset. He said he'd just remembered an appointment and that he'd have to leave at once. In two minutes I was out on the street, alone."

"And then you flew back to London?"

"First I went back to the little café, hoping I might see the man who'd given me the card. But there was no sign of him. I still had a few hours before flight time and I was more determined than ever to solve the mystery. I took a taxi to an agency on the Rue de l'Université that specializes in translation work. The head of the agency, a man named Kappi, has been in business since before the Second World War. I certainly thought that he could help me if anybody could."

"But he didn't?"

"It was unbelievable! He looked at the card, studied it for a few moments, and then excused himself. I was kept waiting perhaps ten minutes. When he returned he was accompanied by a uniformed policeman who said I must go with him to headquarters."

"They arrested you?"

"Almost. I went with him, demanding to know the reason for it, but he wouldn't tell me. At police headquarters I was questioned by a chief inspector who wanted to know where I'd gotten the card. I told him about the man in the café. After an hour of questioning he finally released me with the warning to leave the country at once."

"And the card?"

"He didn't want to return it, but I insisted. Since he hadn't actually charged me with anything, he had no grounds for keeping

it. Finally he consented, but urged me to burn it at once and not show it to another person."

"But you didn't burn it."

Gemma Malone drew a deep breath. "Believe me, I was tempted! After all the trouble it caused me, I wanted to take a match to it. That was just for a moment, though. I took it out and looked at its strange, almost-French words, and knew I could never part with it till I knew their meaning. I put it away safely in my suitcase, afraid if I carried it with me I'd pull it out to show to someone else. I arrived back in London last night, and phoned mother. She suggested I call you this morning. If anything was ever a concealed communication, my mysterious card is!"

"You should have brought it with you."

"When I phoned from the apartment, you weren't in yet. And when I finally reached you, I was just too anxious to go back for it."

Rand glanced at his watch. "It's a slow day. I could go there with you now, if you'd like."

Now that the story was told, the tension had left her face. It was as if she'd transferred the burden to his shoulders. "I'd appreciate it if you could do that. I hope it won't inconvenience you."

"Not at all." Rand reached for his topcoat. The January sun had vanished behind a solid layer of cloud, and he knew there would be a chill in the air. "Actually, your story is especially interesting to me for a very odd reason."

"Oh? What's that?"

"I'll tell you after I see the card," Rand said with a smile.

He locked his office and told Parkinson he was leaving for the day. Then he followed Gemma Malone into the elevator. She'd come without a car so they took Rand's, driving across London to one of the newer apartment buildings where she lived. He parked across the street from the main entrance and took her arm to escort her through the traffic.

Suddenly, as they reached the opposite curb, he felt her tense beneath his touch. "Rand—that man!"

He followed her stare and saw a slim middle-aged man running quickly toward them. He'd held up his hand, as if to attract their attention. "What about him?" Rand asked her.

"It's the man from the Paris café! The one who gave me that card last week!"

"Miss," the man called out. "Please, Miss!"

Rand walked forward to intercept him. A curious chill was gripping his spine. "What is this?" he asked. "What do you want from the lady?"

"The card," he said. "I want—"

"Why did you give it to me?" Gemma asked. "What does it mean? Who are you?"

The man started to speak again. He moved his mouth, but no words came. Then he toppled forward, almost into Rand's arms. Rand eased him to the pavement and checked his pulse.

"What's happened?" Gemma asked, "Is he all right?"

Rand looked up to her. "I think he's dead."

"Dead!"

"Go inside and call the police. I'll stay with him. And after you call, bring me that card. It could be very important."

He watched her hurry into the apartment house. Then he went quickly through the dead man's pockets, searching for identification. The first thing he found was a French passport in the name of Henri Seller. Before he could look further, a few people had begun to gather. A policeman directing traffic in the next block headed toward him.

"What's the trouble, sir?" the bobby asked.

"Dead man. We've called for help." He could see Gemma hurrying back out the door, clutching a white card in her hand.

"Rand," she murmured when she reached him. "My God, Rand, am I going mad?"

"Is this the card?"

"Yes. It was still locked in my suitcase. This is the card, but—it's blank!"

After he'd poured her a stiff drink, Rand sat down to examine the card. It was about the size of an ordinary postcard, and of a similar stiff paper. It was plain white, without any markings. Both sides were utterly blank.

"I swear to you, Rand, there was writing on it! About ten or twelve words, written in blue ink. I'm not lying!"

"I didn't say you were."

"That's the trouble! You haven't said anything since that man died! My God, what are you thinking?"

He leaned back in the chair and tried to marshal his thoughts. They were in her apartment, where they'd come after Rand identified himself to the police and asked that a medical report be

phoned to him at Gemma's number. Now there was nothing to do but wait. Even the facilities of Double-C couldn't help with a concealed communication which had ceased to exist.

"My thoughts are quite confused at the moment," he told her honestly. "You see, I've read this story before."

"What?"

"Almost eighty years ago a writer named Moffett—Cleveland Moffett, I think—published a story called *The Mysterious Card*. I remember reading it in an anthology some years back. The point is that your experience duplicates the situation in *The Mysterious Card* almost exactly. In the story a young American—I think he was young, but I can't remember all the details—an American visiting in Paris received the card from a mystery woman at the Folies Bergère. Like you he tries to get the French message translated. But everyone who sees the card scorns him. He is evicted from two hotels, jailed for the night, and even deserted by his wife when he shows her the message on the card."

"At least I'm not married," Gemma said.

"Finally returning to New York, he encounters the woman who presented him with the card. But she drops dead before she can reveal its secret—and when he looks at the card it's blank."

"But that's my story!"

"It is indeed."

"What happened at the end? What was the solution?"

"That was the end. The story had no solution." He got up and poured them both another drink.

"No solution! But it must have some answer!"

"As I remember it, the author was finally prevailed upon to write a sequel. But the answer he provided was some supernatural explanation involving a picture of a demon soul."

She stared down at the blank card on the table between them. "I'm beginning to think this is supernatural too."

The telephone rang and he answered it. He recognized the voice of Inspector Stephens at the other end. "What are you up to now, Rand? What's this business about the dead Frenchman?"

"I was on the scene and I requested a report on the cause of death."

Stephens grunted. "They haven't done a full autopsy yet, but it looks like poison. Something like snake venom that traveled through his bloodstream and killed him when it reached his heart."

"You're telling me he was bitten by a snake in the middle of London?"

"Hardly. But it was that type of poison, injected into his body somehow. The killer was quite human, I assure you."

"Thanks, Inspector," Rand said and started to hang up.

"Wait a minute! What have you got on this case?"

"Nothing yet. I'll keep in touch."

He told Gemma what he'd learned. She frowned and pushed the black hair back from her face. "Was the person poisoned in this story you mentioned?"

"No."

"Then it's not the same, is it?"

"Not on that point, at least."

She downed the rest of the drink he'd made for her. "What's happening, Rand? What have I gotten myself involved in?"

His eyes met hers, and he hated himself for what he had to say next. "I have to consider the most likely explanation that fits the facts, Gemma."

"And that is—?"

"That everything you've told me is a lie." She gave a little gasp. "That there never was any message on the card, and that all this business of asking people to read it was simply inspired by a reading of that story I mentioned. That your coming to me, and getting me back here, was all part of a clever plot on your part to kill that man."

"Get out of here!" she screamed, her face twisted with anger. "Get out!"

"Listen to me."

"I came to you for help, and now you've accused me of killing a man!"

"You didn't let me finish. I'm willing to admit that life can sometimes imitate art. It could have happened just as you say."

Her sudden burst of anger had given way to an uncontrolled sobbing. She threw herself onto the couch and buried her head in her arms. Rand had little experience with crying women, and he stood by helplessly for a moment. Either she was a good actress or she was really upset by the events of the past few days. Finally he said simply, "Let me take this card. I'll phone you tomorrow."

She was still crying when he let himself quietly out the door.

Parkinson frowned down at the blank card Rand had handed

him. "A message? There's supposed to be a message on this?"

"Check it out and see what you can find. At this point I don't know what to believe."

When Parkinson had gone off with the card, Rand phoned Inspector Stephens at Scotland Yard. "Have you completed the autopsy on that Frenchman yet?"

"We were right about the poison, Rand. It was injected into his hand near the wrist."

"How long would it take to kill him?"

"That's hard to say. Perhaps an hour, though it could have been a great deal less if he exerted himself."

"He started running toward us when he saw Gemma."

"Who's Gemma?"

"That's a long story. But his running explains why he died at that moment. The blood pumped the poison to his heart. How do you think it was injected into his hand?"

"Someone could have bumped into him, or even shaken hands with him. I saw a movie once where a spy was killed like that. Henri Seller wouldn't have been a spy, would he, Rand?"

"Not that I know of, and I have no idea who killed him. You have a suspicious nature, Inspector."

"It comes from working with you."

Rand hung up with a promise to keep Stephens informed, and then went out to the deciphering room to see what luck Parkinson was having with the card. The younger man had placed the card beneath a powerful profile microscope and was examining it intently.

"What's the verdict?" Rand asked.

"There was something written on it, all right. Look here, you can see the indentations of the pen on the fibers of the card."

Rand grunted. "Disappearing ink. Any way we can read it?"

"Doubtful. The card's surface is too hard to show a good impression. I can check for a chemical residue, but these disappearing inks generally just evaporate."

"Try the iodine-vapor test and a general reagent. It might be an invisible ink that's still present there."

"What's all this about, sir?"

"Damned if I know, Parkinson."

She opened the door to his buzzing and immediately tried to close it when she saw him. "Hold it, Gemma. I just want to talk."

"Didn't we talk enough yesterday?"

"I'm sorry about that. I wanted to tell you we've been examining the card. We've found evidence there was writing on it, probably in disappearing ink."

"Come in," she said with a sigh, holding open the door.

"I'm sorry if I seemed to be accusing you yesterday."

"I didn't mind the accusation as much as the doubting. After what I've been through these last few days, it was more than I could handle. You'll have to forgive me for the hysterics."

"We all have our bad moments."

She curled-up on the couch. "I'll bet you never do."

"You'd be wrong. When I was first in the department, before the days of Double-C, I once confused a Vigenere cipher with a Polybius, though they're nothing alike. They kidded me for days about that, and I really lost my temper once. I've had a sort of mental block about Vigenere ciphers ever since."

"That's not the same thing."

He smiled down at her. In that moment she reminded him of her mother, of Sam Malone's wife. "Anyway, I believe your story. I plan to go to Paris tomorrow and get to the bottom of this thing. It would be a great help if you'd come along."

"You're going there just for me?"

"Of course. There's some answer to this, and we're going to find it."

She sat up straight. "All right. I'll come with you."

"Good. I'll arrange for the tickets and pick you up at ten in the morning." He did not mention the poisoning of Henri Seller, but as he was leaving he said quite casually, "You'd better stay in to-night. And don't open your door for anybody."

Back at Double-C, Rand found Parkinson in a state of considerable excitement. "We've managed to retrieve a portion of the message with chemicals, sir."

"Is it in French?"

"Well." Parkinson scratched his head. "Yes, and no. The letter groupings seem French—things like *-tre* and *-eux* and *-esse*—but the words themselves don't make any sense. It seems to be a jumble."

"A Cardano grille, perhaps. Or a turning grille like the one the Germans used in the First World War."

"It seems likely. We're working on that possibility."

"It was the French cryptanalysts who spotted the German turn-

ing grilles. They could be using one themselves."

"At this late date?" Parkinson sounded skeptical, and he had reason to be. In World War I, Germany had provided her signal troops with the square cardboard grilles for laying over messages. But the system had obvious disadvantages—the grilles could fall into enemy hands, the system was easily susceptible to multiple anagramming and tended toward geometrical symmetries. Within four months Germany was forced to abandon it.

"It's still worth a try," Rand decided.

"What is all this business, sir?"

Rand explained as quickly as he could. "You see," he concluded, "there's still a problem. If the card carried a coded message of some sort, which no one could read, why did five different people—chosen by her at random—turn away with something like horror? Why did they make her leave the hotels? Why did they call the police?"

"There's no answer."

"There's always an answer."

"How do you intend to find it?"

"By going to Paris," Rand said.

Once they'd landed in France and passed through Customs, Gemma Malone seemed to take on a whole new personality. The frightened, half-hysterical girl gave way to a woman quite sure of herself. She might have been showing her lover the sights of Paris as they rode to the hotel where her troubles had begun.

"You're truly amazing," Rand said as she pointed out the Arc de Triomphe as if he'd never seen it before. "Just yesterday you seemed at your wit's end over this whole matter. Now you don't have a care in the world."

"That's because you're along, Rand! I know you'll get to the bottom of it."

It wasn't right. The whole thing wasn't right. Had she lured him to Paris for some other purpose, making up the story of the card? Was she a smuggler carrying a fortune in jewels to the city, or a wild young lady trying to seduce him? But every possibility ran up against the fact of Henri Seller's murder. If her story was untrue, then she'd had a hand in killing Seller. And could he believe that?

"Is this the place?" he asked as the taxi pulled up at a small, side-street hotel near the river.

"This is it. I was staying here, and the sidewalk café is just down the street."

She stood back and let him do the talking when they confronted the manager. He was a slim white-haired man named Masset who listened intently to Rand's words. He never looked in Gemma's direction, but said simply, "There must be some mistake. I do not remember refusing to translate the words on a card. I certainly do not remember asking the young lady to leave. But we have so many guests—"

At the second hotel it was the same. The aging manager seemed to remember Gemma, but professed no knowledge of any card. Outside, Rand noted that her good humor was rapidly on the decline. "Why didn't you *question* him more, Rand? Can't you see he's lying?"

"I can't confront him with that possibility unless I know the reason for his lie."

"But—"

"What about this friend of yours? This photographer?"

"Peter Liasse. Yes, he was the next one I went to. Peter would tell the truth, I'm certain."

They found Liasse in his studio, surrounded by blown-up photographs of pouting fashion models, all slim and dark and boyish, all looking more or less like Gemma. He seemed to fit well into the uncle role that Gemma had assigned to him, kissing her lightly on the cheek and asking what brought her back to Paris so soon.

"It's that card, Peter. The one I showed you. The man who gave it to me is dead."

"Card?" He looked vague for a moment, then said, "Oh, I remember now."

"What did it say, Mr. Liasse?" Rand asked.

"I forget the exact words."

"But Gemma says they upset you."

Liasse began pacing the floor of his loft-like studio. "A dirty joke of some sort," he said with a wave of his hand. "Such things always upset me. I've put it out of my mind."

Rand could see he would get no further with Liasse than with the two hotel managers. Still, an idea was taking shape in the back of his mind. When they were once more on the street Gemma asked, "Do you want to see Kappi now? He's the translator I visited next."

"All right," Rand agreed. But he already knew what they would find.

He wasn't disappointed. The translator did not deny the incident with the police, but refused to give any explanation for it. As they were leaving the shop, however, he motioned Rand aside. "The girl's life is in danger. Yours may be, too, if you stay with her."

"What's this all about?"

"I can say no more." The man turned away.

Outside again, Gemma asked, "Where to now? The police station?"

"No, the sidewalk café near the first hotel. The place where Henri Seller gave you the card."

When they were seated at the very table Gemma had occupied on the previous occasion she asked, "Why didn't you want to meet the fifth man?"

"Letting the police know I was investigating the case might complicate things. My being here is unofficial so far. Besides, I didn't need to meet the chief inspector who questioned you. I already know everything he could tell me. In fact, it wouldn't have been really necessary for me to meet any of the five men."

"But—"

Rand motioned to the waitress and ordered two glasses of wine. "You see, Gemma, there is an explanation for what's happened to you."

"An explanation other than my having lied?"

"Yes. I told you I was sorry about that."

"But the message—what did it say?"

"The message was in code."

"Could those people read it?"

"That's doubtful, although one of them might have."

"You're telling me I approached five people at random in the city of Paris and showed them that card which they couldn't read and it so terrified them that they sent me away, called the police, and otherwise behaved in a most unlikely manner?"

"I'm telling you exactly that. But your five people weren't all that random."

"Are you saying I lied again?"

"No. I'm simply saying the five have a number of things in common. One thing, in particular."

"How can you say that? You didn't even meet the last one!"

"I didn't need to."

"Two hotel managers, a photographer, a translator, a police inspector . . . they have nothing in common! They're all Frenchman, but who else would you expect to find in Paris?"

"They're all Frenchmen, yes, and they're all . . ." His voice drifted off as he spotted a young woman hurrying along the street, swinging a large hatbox of the type models often carry.

"What is it, Rand?"

"I believe we're in luck."

The woman paused at the entrance to the sidewalk café, as if debating whether or not to enter. Rand walked up to her and held out a card. "This is for you," he said quietly.

She looked at him, hesitated only an instant, and then took the card. He watched her head up the quiet street, already knowing what her destination would be.

"Who was that?" Gemma asked, joining him.

"The woman who was supposed to receive the first card."

"How could you have known that?"

"Simple," Rand replied. "She looks like you."

"She does not! I'm better looking than that!"

He chuckled softly. "Of course you are, but to a man who didn't know either of you, you would fit her description—especially if you both carried model's bags and you happened to be seated at her table in the café."

"Her table?"

"The table where she was supposed to be. That coincidence could have cost you your life."

"You're still talking in riddles, Rand! The whole thing seems nothing but coincidences to me. Where has that girl gone now?"

"To deliver the message I gave her. Come on."

"Deliver it to who?"

But he didn't answer. Instead, he headed up the narrow street with Gemma, knowing she'd realize soon enough where they were going. After a moment she said, "You're taking me back to Peter Liasse's studio."

"That's right. Didn't you notice those pictures on his walls? He seems to specialize in girls of your general appearance and coloring. That's why it was no coincidence that she was in this neighborhood."

They mounted the steps to his studio and Rand pushed open the door. "Come in, come in," Liasse called out. "I've been expecting

you, Mr. Rand, ever since Maria arrived with the card."

He was standing in the center of the studio, one hand draped casually over a camera tripod. In the other hand he held a Luger pistol, pointed at Rand's heart.

Gemma Malone, wide-eyed with fright, moved away from Rand's side. "Peter, what is all this business?"

"Ask your English friend. On the card he wrote *I know*."

She turned toward Rand and he took his cue, trying not to look at the gun in the photographer's hand. "You see, Gemma, all the people to whom you showed the card had one thing in common, besides the fact that they were Frenchmen—they were all *aging* Frenchmen, middle-aged or older. I should have known it without even meeting them. You described the second hotel manager as a distinguished white-haired man, which he was. And I saw that the first manager had white hair too. You told me Peter here was a kindly old fellow who was like an uncle to you, and you said the translator, Kappi, had been in business since before the Second World War. Without even meeting him, I knew a chief inspector with the Paris police must be at least middle-aged too."

"I never thought of that," Gemma admitted.

"You told me in my office that you usually turned to older men when you had a problem. It was natural for you to do it, even when choosing people at random."

"You're very wise," Liasse interjected.

"Wise and lucky. My people back in London were able to bring out part of the message that had faded away—enough to know it was written in code, probably using a grille like the one the Germans had in the First World War. So the question became clearer. Five aging Frenchmen had been shown a card on which appeared a message in cipher, using bits and pieces of French words. Why were they frightened? Why did they send you away, Gemma? Not because they could read the message, but because they recognized the type of cipher being used. It's reasonable to assume all five were living in France during the Second World War. What sort of code might they have recognized at once? A cipher used by the French underground."

"Very good," Liasse said. The gun did not waver.

"Someone—some group—was using the old cipher for a new purpose. Perhaps the word had gotten around, or perhaps the very possibility was enough to frighten these people. They didn't want

to be involved, so they sent Gemma away. If anything happened to her, they didn't want it happening in their hotels.

"Your case, Liasse, was different. As soon as you saw the card you realized what must have happened. You let Gemma keep the card, because you knew the messages were always written in disappearing ink. But you reported Seller's error, and he paid for that error with his life. His frantic effort to retrieve the card from Gemma was too late."

"What about Kappi and the police?" Gemma asked.

"Kappi called the police because he'd heard about some sort of revived underground, I imagine. The chief inspector had heard about it too. Like the others, they all recognized the old wartime cipher."

Peter Liasse nodded. "And how did you know the message was meant for me?"

"Those photographs you take, with models who look like Gemma—they told me that Gemma had been mistaken for one of your other girls. A likely mistake, since the sidewalk café is just down the street. Gemma had finished modeling early that day, and been at the café table instead of the girl you called Maria. If one of your models was being used to carry the messages, it was a likely guess that you were either the sender or receiver. But if you were the sender, you could have passed the card to the girl in the safety of your studio.

"No, it was much more likely that the message was meant for you. While your mail might be watched and your telephone tapped, a model could carry anything to your studio without suspicion. And nothing is more natural in France than a man passing a card to a woman in a café. His phone number, perhaps, or an offer of a drink. It was a simple but effective system."

"Effective until that fool Seller picked the wrong girl," Liasse said. "He had never operated on this end before."

"What end had he operated on? Algeria, perhaps? Is it another plot against the government, as in the old OAS days?"

"Something like that," the photographer admitted. "The details needn't concern you."

"I like to know what I'm going to die for."

"Very well. You remember the assassination in Spain some months back? The same thing will happen in Paris, very soon. Now turn your back."

"Peter!" Gemma gasped. "You can't *kill* him!"

"The cause is more important than a few lives along the way."

"Before you shoot me," Rand said, "there's something in my pocket you should read. A copy of a telegram I sent to my London office an hour ago."

"What telegram?" he asked suspiciously.

"I'll show you," Rand said, reaching for his inner pocket.

"None of that!" The Luger came up, steady. "Slip your coat off and toss it over here!"

Rand did as he was told and stepped back. Liasse bent carefully, keeping his eyes on them, and reached into the inner pocket. Almost at once he pulled his hand back. "Damn! There's a pin in the lining!" He looked at the drop of blood on his finger.

"Too bad, Liasse," Rand said. "Too bad. You lose."

"What?"

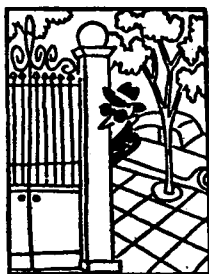
"Snake venom—the same sort your people used on Seller. You'll be dead in an hour."

The gun wavered then, and Liasse's face froze in terror. He turned to Rand, and then ran for the bathroom. A moment later Rand took the Luger away from him while he whimpered at the medicine cabinet, trying to do something for the pinprick on his finger.

"Call the police, Gemma," Rand said with a sigh.

"Poor Peter! Is it really snake venom?"

Rand lowered his voice and grinned. "Hardly. But if we can keep him thinking so for another hour, he might give the police some very interesting information."



Mrs. Ainsworth is a native New Orleansian who has been "scribbling" ever since she can remember. She has sold some verse—one to a greeting-card company, a verse she had written for her husband's birthday. She is an "old movie" buff, a gardener, and an "enthusiastic traveler." She is also "addicted to mystery stories" . . .

MYSTERY STORIES REALLY SCARE ME; or, The Inconsistencies Will Get Me If I Don't Watch Out by LOUISE C. AINSWORTH

From reading mystery stories there is one thing I have learned:
I'd be the kind of suspect for whom sleuths have often yearned.
One baffling crime was almost solved when suddenly a catch
Popped up to stump the experts—the lipstick colors didn't match.
Now in my purse I've three of them, all different shades of red,
So they would free three other gals and nab poor me instead!

One time a strange discrepancy was that the nylon hose
The lady corpse had on her legs were not the size of those
That were inside her dresser drawer. I'm on the spot again.
See how it looks for me: I often have to buy size ten
Though they're too small—this is both sad and true, so please
don't laugh—
They never seem to stock my size which is ten and a half!

Sometimes the only clue they find is just a single hair
And I have cause to worry for my safety even there.
My hair though dark is red in spots from being in the sun.
Last night I found my first gray hair, and though it's only one
It makes me fit three characters—all three distinctly shady—
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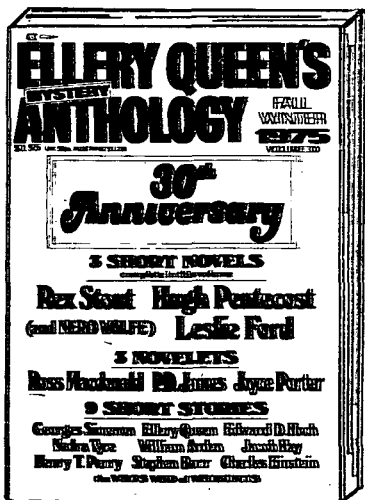
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